Sing Your Sadness Deep

Advance Praise for *Sing Your Sadness Deep*

"Laura Mauro's SING YOUR SADNESS DEEP is a beautiful foray into the strange and uncanny. She digs deep into the psyche of her characters, revelling in the mysteries that propel them through their confrontations with the liminal and the bizarre. A sublime and haunting debut."

— Simon Strantzas, author of NOTHING IS EVERYTHING

"Laura Mauro does indeed sing her sadness deep, with assured melodies, strange resonances and beautiful harmonies. This is just her first collection—I can't wait to see what she will do next."

— Priya Sharma, author of ALL THE FABULOUS BEASTS

"Laura Mauro's work exists in the hard space where the mythic collides with the everyday, where fairy tales transform into stories that feel modern and urgent. These are horror stories, yes—but it's horror born from a cry for compassion and understanding. Disturbing and heartfelt, beautiful yet grotesque, they reveal strange new worlds whilst shining a light on the world we think we know."

—Robert Shearman, author of TINY DEATHS

Sing Your Sadness Deep

Laura Mauro

UP UNDERTOW PUBLICATIONS

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This book is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual events or persons—living, dead, or undead—is entirely coincidental.

For Rob. For everything.
And all the adventures still to come.

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SUN DOGS

It hadn't rained in close to seven weeks the night I met you. The rain-barrels were down to the last silty dregs, the skies stubborn in their pale blue clarity. I wasn't even certain the car would start; it chugged to life on the third attempt, emitting a choked gurgle like a throat full of sand. My sole back-up plan: an ageing Chevy Cavalier, tyres balding, paintwork leprous, a quarter-tank of gas which might not even get me the whole way to Wildrose.

My parents had been preppers; I should've known better. Boxes of ammo next to the bread in the pantry, towering crates of bottled water in the basement. Rucksacks in the hall closet piled with emergency supplies—should the End Days catch us unawares—and a framed cross-stitch on the wall: "Failure to Prepare Is Preparing to Fail." Pastel colours, delicate bluebell border; a portent of doom, handcrafted with love.

I left at dusk. The sky was a cut mouth bleeding out onto the western mountains. It seemed there was not a single soul out on the highway that night except for me. If the Chevy broke down, I'd be screwed; cellphone reception was null this far out into the desert, and hadn't that been the entire point in the first place? Going solo on the edge of civilisation: the complete amputation of my former life, gangrenous with regrets.

I had a foil blanket in the trunk, a protein bar in the glovebox. Half a bottle of water in the footwell. Not good enough. I kept an eye on the fuel gauge as I drove, foot light on the gas. There was a gas station at Wildrose, a general store and a gift shop. A campsite out back full of shiny-white RVs, gleaming despite the dust. Desert

adventure for kindergartners. A thought came to me in my mother's voice, criticism from beyond the grave: at least they have water.

The way station was just visible on the horizon, a halo of light lingering over the scrub and above it, a fat, pale moon. Not the blood-red moon of my childhood terrors, heralding the arrival of the End Days—peeling back the curtains, peering up at the sky through parted fingers, because you could never tell when it might happen, and you would have to be Ready when it did.

The asphalt gleamed black in the headlights. Something ducked out of the road, into the sparse cover of the scrub. I saw it in the rear-view mirror; bright eyes sparked momentarily, the shadow of some slender creature crouched just off the roadside. Kit fox, maybe, or bobcat. I turned back to the road.

A man stepped out in front of the car.

I hit the brakes hard. The car arced wildly; my hands were tight on the wheel, my eyes squeezed shut, awaiting the impact, the crunch of bone against metal. When I opened them, the car was still, and the man was intact, staring at me with wide-eyed surprise in the middle of the road. I unbuckled the seatbelt with trembling fingers, aware now of how sore my sternum felt, how fast my heart was beating. Slowly, I stepped out of the car.

The man took a step forward. Clutched tight in his hands was a hunting rifle. .204 Ruger, walnut stock. Approach with caution. He had a canteen of water at his hip, heavy-duty boots, scuffed and well-worn. He scanned me. "Are you hurt?"

My ribs ached with each exhalation, muscles contracting over bruised bone. "I'm fine," I said. His shoulders were loose, his fingers slack on the gun. No obvious signs of hostility, but I was a lone female on an empty highway, and I was unarmed. I could almost hear my daddy rolling in his grave. "You ought to take care if you're coming out here in the dark. I could've killed you." I swallowed hard, tasting sour adrenaline. "I could've killed us both."

The seashore hiss of cicadas filled the momentary silence. "I'm sorry," he said, after a time. He wasn't looking at me. His eyes were focused on some point beyond the car, out towards the darkened scrub, dust-pale in the moonlight. I wondered what he was looking

for. "Are you alone?" Eyes locked on mine now, a bright, lunatic urgency. I looked quickly over my shoulder, judging the distance to the car. "It's not safe to be alone out here," he said, "especially at night. There're some vicious creatures around. You got a gun?"

"Yes."

"Keep it loaded. Carry it with you." Staring back out at the roadside now, finger inching closer to the safety catch. His paranoia made my skin itch, as though it were contagious. "A kid got killed up at the campsite yesterday. Some kind of animal got him. You'd best take care."

"I've lived out here for some time now," I said, mindful of how he held the rifle, how intently he scanned the horizon. My muscles were tight, my breathing a little too quick. "I can handle animals just fine."

He snorted. "They're getting bolder. People feed them like they're pets. Try to get pictures with them, if you can believe it. They've forgotten to be afraid of humans and they ain't keeping their distance like they used to." He stepped off the road, into the sand. I flexed my fingers, loosening too-taut ligaments. I thought about asking what he was doing here, alone on the highway; what he was looking for out in the scrub. I caught the sudden glint of his rifle scope as he turned, the muscular heft of him illuminated in the headlights, and I thought better of questioning him.

The car had come to rest at an angle, bisecting the highway. I slipped into the driver's seat and locked the door behind me. The man was a little way off the road and moving further, cautious steps like a hunter flushing out a deer, gun raised and ready.

This time, the engine started on the first try. I hit reverse, pulled the car around; wheels ground on gravel. I peered over my shoulder as the car reversed.

And then I saw you, cowering in the back seat; skin and bone and blood, torn blue jeans and a man's leather jacket; I bit back a cry of surprise, staring in rapt horror at the bright blood pooling on the seat beneath you, fingersmeared over your face like warpaint. You looked up at me, eyes wide, finger pressed urgently to your lips, and I could sense your terror so acutely I could almost feel it; a shot of panicked adrenaline straight to the heart.

I had no water and precious little fuel, but I swung the car round. He couldn't fail to notice the change in direction, but I paid him no mind as I hit the gas. If I drove fast enough, he'd never know where I'd taken you. If the fuel held out, we might even get there in one piece.

"It's going to be okay," I told you, though I had no idea if it really would. You pressed your face into the worn fabric of the back seat, exhausted; your limbs were slack, your eyes closed. It looked as though you were dying. The thought terrified me, not because I cared about you, but because, although I could shoot and skin and gut a deer without so much as flinching, I had never in my life watched a human being die.

The wheels ate up the distance. Above, the night gathered like a bruise. I wondered what had happened to you. How you came to be out there, all alone in the desert, and whether it was you the man had been chasing in the dark.

The car ran dry a quarter mile from home. I had to carry you the rest of the way, first on my back, then in my arms when you at last fell unconscious. My bruised ribs ached with the weight of you. Your skin was hot, as though you'd baked a while in the sun; you felt empty in my arms, exsanguinated, breathing shallow. Helpless. I thought about leaving you there. Taking you a way off the road, out into the dunes, so that when death came for you—inevitably, I thought, cradling your bird-hollow bones—the coyotes and hawks might pick your remains clean. But home was close, and your heart still beat, and I thought we've come this far. Only a little further now.

Home was a brick and timber shack built on land that had once been my father's. He in turn had bought the land for next to nothing from a man who'd run a campsite there in the early 90's. It was where my dad had always intended to 'bug out' to when the End Days came. As it turned out, heart failure came first. He hadn't prepared for that eventuality.

I didn't want you in my home. You have to understand that. Those last hundred metres to the house were beset with doubt. I couldn't have left you bleeding by the roadside, entirely at the mercy of an armed stranger; I knew the ways men could hurt women, how inclined they were towards it when the power balance shifted in their favour. I could've taken you to Wildrose, made you someone else's problem, but if he had been chasing you—and my instincts were screaming that he had—then he would surely think to look for you there. I can't honestly say why I took you with me except that in all my years, I had never seen anyone look quite so afraid as you had in that moment.

You stirred when I laid you out on the couch, mumbling something unintelligible. I peeled off your jacket, pulling limp arms through worn sleeves. Your limbs were slender but your muscles were tight as cord beneath the skin, the lean physique of a long-distance runner. I wondered when you'd eaten last. Adjacent to your right shoulder was a puckered hole, a glistening crater of flesh and bloody, matted shirt.

I cradled your head against my chest as I lifted you up, hoping to find an exit wound. Whoever had shot you had done so from a high angle, standing above you; the exit wound was lower down, suggesting a diagonal trajectory. Clean margins. One hand cupped the back of your skull as I traced the radius. I pried at the shredded edges of your shirt, peeling it gently away from the wound. Your muscles tensed; if you weren't so weak you might have fought me.

"It's okay," I murmured absently. Your dark hair was thick beneath my fingers, the matted pelt of a wild thing. "You're safe now."

Slowly, you relaxed, allowing me to peel away the fabric. There was blood on the couch, a faint scrim of dirt. Your lips moved against my skin, barely a whisper. It sounded like 'thank you'.

You slept while I cleaned your wound and stitched the edges together—not a beautiful job, but good enough. I washed my hands, aware that I had only half a bottle of water left, no fuel, no way back

to Wildrose. My nearest neighbours were two miles away. I didn't want to leave you alone, but that half bottle wasn't going to stretch much further. I didn't know when you'd last eaten or drank. You'd need water far more than I would when you woke.

I sat on the porch and lit a cigarette; I blew smoke into the breeze, watching it dissipate. It was long past midnight and my bones felt heavy beneath the skin, my eyes weary; I hated the idea of sleeping only yards away from a stranger. I'd lived alone for years, long before I even considered relocating to the desert. I'd never been close to my brother as a child; my school reports bluntly stated that I did not play well with others.

The lunatic cry of a coyote cut through the night. The sky was starless, the moon obscured behind a thin veil of cloud. I'd smoked almost down to my fingers. When the sun rose, I would set out with my hat in my hands and ask the Burnetts for water. They'd be quietly scornful, but I could swallow that, and they wouldn't deny me.

I stubbed the cigarette out on the step and came back inside. You watched me approach, and I saw how you cringed away from me—the simultaneous drawing inward of all your muscles, humble as a beaten dog. I hated you for that; I hated that pang of sympathy, that sharp, sudden ache in my heart.

"I'm not gonna hurt you," I said. I sat down opposite. The foldout chair creaked under my weight. You flinched. "I promise you that. But you can't stop here for long."

Your eyes were wary beneath your sweat-tangled hair. You knotted your hands in the blanket, thick with dirt beneath the nails, black crescents on bony fingers. "I don't want to," you replied, curt. Your voice was water on gravel.

"Is there anyone you want me to call? I don't have a phone here, but there's a family nearby who do."

You shook your head and looked away, staring sullenly at the curtains. It occurred to me then that you might be as unaccustomed to the company of other people as I was.

"All right. Well, as soon as the sun comes up I'm heading out. I won't be gone long; I just need to beg a little fuel and some water from the neighbours. I'm running bone dry."

"It's going to rain."

I laughed at that. "They've been saying that for weeks and I haven't seen so much as a drop."

You laid your head back on the pillow. "It's going to rain," you said, quietly now, a voice on the precipice of sleep. Your eyes were closed. "Not now, but soon. Can't you smell it?"

The air smelled of stale cigarette smoke, the ripe rust stink of blood. "I won't be gone long," I said. "An hour, maybe. I don't usually get visitors but I'll lock the door just in case. You'll be safe here 'til I get back. You should rest until then."

I rose from my chair. You were already asleep, or perhaps you were pretending. I imagined you were watching me as I left, peering through barely-parted lids. It was difficult to tell in the dark. I pulled the front door shut as I passed through the hall, turning the lock with a barely audible pop. I hadn't locked my door in years. I resented you for this sudden uncertainty.

The bedroom window framed a nascent sunrise; rose gold blooming slowly outward. I lay back on the bed, fighting sleep. You were at the periphery of my vision, utterly still. You might have been dead, and in that moment I might not have minded.

I laced my hands behind my skull and waited for morning.

You were asleep when I left. I decided against locking the door behind me; it felt like imprisonment, shutting you inside that tiny house in the gathering heat of the day. And part of me hoped you'd be gone by the time I returned. That you'd wake up to an unlocked door and smell freedom.

It was barely six AM and already the chill of the night had dissipated, a thick heat building behind the blanket of cloud overhead. I set out with a five litre bottle under one arm, a jerry can in my free hand. The Burnetts lived out towards the hills. They'd been out here a long time, had raised and home-schooled their kids and were now alone, enjoying the solitude of their retirement. The kids moved to San Francisco, got jobs in tech startups and organic bakeries and

never came back to visit. I imagined they must still dream about sand; hear the whisper of the wind along the dunes even in the depths of sleep.

The Burnetts' home was brick-built, a chimera made from parts scavenged over the best part of a decade and extended over and over, a tumorous mass expanding slowly into the scrub. They tolerated my presence; I was far enough away and suitably unobtrusive, not even a smudge on their wide blue horizon. I did not intrude upon their isolation.

Peggy was in the yard as I approached. High-waisted blue jeans slung on motherly hips, skin the shade and texture of old hide. "What brings you up here so early, Sadie?" She'd affected a perfect neutrality, but she glanced briefly down at the water bottle under my arm the way a rich man might glance at a beggar's bowl.

"Real sorry to trouble you, Peggy," I said. Humility was not my strong suit, but the shame that bowed my head was genuine. I had, after all, failed to prepare. I explained the situation without once mentioning you; as I spoke, the contortions of her face and haughty arch of her eyebrow reminded me so much of my mother it almost hurt. Serves you right, I imagined her saying, mouth twisted in spite. You'll die of thirst, lazy girl. The Rapture will catch you with your pants down and your engine dry, and then you'll be sorry.

She didn't. She listened, and did not say a word until I was done. And when I was, she beckoned me wordlessly to the back of the house. Six blue water barrels sat lined up in the shade. A far larger rain barrel was just visible beyond the curve of the far wall.

"Don't tell Dan about this," Peggy said, taking the water bottle from me. I heard her knees creak as she squatted. I thought about offering to help and knew she'd be offended. "Lord knows he means well. He's a big believer in tough love, you know? Says it's a harsh world out there and young folks have got to learn to fend for themselves, 'cause it's only gonna get harsher." Water spilled out of the tap, into the bottle. I realised then just how parched my throat was. "No doubt he's right, but that don't mean you can't lend a hand every now and again. It's about compassion, ain't it? That's what it's all about in the end." She shut off the tap, screwed the cap onto the bottle. A

spattering of droplets fell from the tap, sinking without trace into the dust. Peggy stood, grimacing as her knees stretched out. "Smart girl like you, you'll do better next time, won't you?"

"I will, Peggy. Thank you."

"There's a little gas in the shed out back. Dan won't notice it's gone. Mostly it's me who drives these days, you know, since my boys moved away." She smiled then, and there was sorrow in the crease of her eyes, the starburst of wrinkles etched into her face. "Do you see much of your mother, Sadie?"

I blinked. In the two years since I'd shacked up in the desert Peggy had never once asked me anything about my life before. I thought about all the tinned food my mama had sent me over the years, always on the brink of expiration, piling up in the spare bedroom of my San Diego apartment because old habits died hard. "She passed away," I said. "Eight years ago."

"Oh." She looked down at her feet. Then, with sudden brightness: "Well, let me get you that gasoline. I'm sure you've got better things to be doing than standing around, listening to me harp on."

I stood in the shade as she went to the shed, gait slow and careful. I wondered if she might be lonely out here, with only wild beasts and a taciturn husband for company; whether perhaps the blissful isolation the Burnetts had worked so hard for was everything they'd built it up to be.

By the time I got back the sun was up high, and you were gone.

You'd folded the blanket and left it atop the pillow, streaked rust-brown with dried blood. It was the only sign you'd ever been there, and even that seemed vague, as though that carefully-folded bundle might have been my own doing. I picked it up. The scent of you clung to the blanket: sweat, faintly sour but not entirely unpleasant. The sharp, animal smell of your hair. I realised I was a little worried about you—out there, exposed to the rising heat, weak and fatigued. The wound was still fresh. It might fester, the stitches might split, anything might happen to you and I had abandoned you. I swallowed

down guilt as I put the blanket in the washbasket. I knew nothing about you except that someone had hurt you, and that you had been afraid, and that I had let you go. I hadn't even asked your name.

I set the water bottle down in a pool of shade outside the house. Inside, I fished out a yellow legal pad from the stash under the couch; there was a half-written article scrawled in upward slanting script, and a deadline for the end of the week. I'd hand-write articles and drive over the state border into Nevada, where Jackie Emery would lend me the use of his computer and internet connection for five bucks an hour. A few articles a month would keep me in fuel and supplies. I'd come to live the kind of pared-down, uncomplicated life my parents might have considered too sparse and therefore doomed, ultimately, to fail.

Pen hovered over paper. Through drooping eyes, my handwriting warped into inscrutable hieroglyphs, marks without form or meaning. I hadn't slept in over twenty-four hours and my eyes were heavy with grit. Just a nap, I told myself, curling up on the couch. The cushions smelled of warm, old dust, and faintly of you. Empirical evidence of your invasion, a stranger's presence yet to be erased. Strange, then, that I didn't seem to mind.

A jaundiced afternoon light cast the room in shades of faded bruise. I'd slept longer than I'd intended. My damaged ribs seemed to groan as I stretched out. A glance at the clock on the windowsill revealed that despite the gloom it was just past three o'clock.

Outside, the sky sweltered behind still clouds. The water bottle was warm to the touch. I poured a little out, washing the sweat from my face and neck; cool water wound a slow path down my spine, coursing down my arms. There was no breeze, no movement; it seemed that the world had stopped without warning and curled in on itself, interminably paused, waiting for something terrible. There was only the mechanical whirr of cicadas in the long grass, the air as still and silent as a held breath.

The first raindrop hit the ground hard, like a thrown penny.

And then the rain came, violently, and all at once. I found myself soaked and winded; the curves and concavities of my face became a waterfall, hair clinging to my face like black kelp, the shock of water in my nostrils, my open mouth. A premature twilight fell and in that sudden darkness I saw you. You were a silhouette against the deluge, growing darker, gaining corporeal form; you were unhurried as you tracked barefoot across the gleaming hardpan, dangling something unseen in your left hand.

I finally found the wherewithal to retreat into the house. My boots left great puddles on the linoleum as I shoved into the tiny shower room, retrieving the only two towels I owned. When I returned you were at the doorway, expectant but still, as though awaiting an invite. In your sodden state you seemed very small, as though the meat of you had been washed away; as though beneath it you had only ever been an imitation of a girl, fashioned from wire and draped in skin. Your smile was almost shy as you handed me your prize—a pair of skinned jackrabbits, rose-quartz flesh wet and glistening.

"I was right," you said, pointing to the sky. Your wounded shoulder drooped. You must have been in pain, but your face betrayed no hint of weakness; your lips retained a hint of a smile, a feral Mona Lisa.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"June."

Your name conjured up vibrant wildflower meadows, a cobalt sky reflected in a smooth, still lake. A Pacific Northwest spring. "As in the month?"

You smiled again, baring bone-white teeth. "As in the month. But I was born in November."

"Come inside," I said. "You'll drown out here."

So you did.

I didn't want you in my home. Except that somewhere along the way—pulling needle and thread through your open skin, perhaps, or your quiet belligerence, when you were hurt and afraid but still defiant—somewhere in among all of it I felt myself beginning to

relent; a palpable sense that something inside of me had opened a little, exposing a glimpse of viscera, the hint of a rib. I hadn't wanted you there, but there you were anyway, my borrowed t-shirt hanging loose from your shoulders, wound cleaned and freshly bandaged. Your hair hung half-dried and leonine: dark honey shot through with silver, though you could surely be no older than twenty-five.

"A boy got killed up in Wildrose," I said.

You stared at the rain running down the window, silver rivulets like molten metal. "I heard an animal tore his throat out."

"Do you believe that?"

You turned your head. Your confusion was tempered with a narrow-eyed wariness; an inherent mistrust of the path I might be leading you down. "Shouldn't I?"

I sighed. "I know that man shot you, June. And he would've killed you if I hadn't found you first. What kind of a man hurts a woman the way he did? What kind of man hunts a woman down like an animal? You think someone like that would flinch at harming a child?"

I saw the flinch in your limbs, the way you folded in on yourself; I saw the defiance bleed slowly from you and felt an answering ache in my chest. "Don't," you murmured. "Please."

"What happened to you?" I wanted to grab you by the shoulders and shake you until the answers tumbled out. I wanted to hold you and soothe your ragged nerves. "It's your business, June, I know that, and maybe I don't have the right to ask questions of you. But I've never seen a person look as scared as you did that night."

"Okay." You had the look of a hunted thing, hunched and ready to bolt, but there was steel in the rigid set of your spine. "Ask me one question. Just one. But then you have to drop it, okay? Because I don't want to talk about this anymore. I want it to go away."

You're in my house, I thought. If you're in danger then I might be too. I deserve to know. Rain clattered relentlessly against the windows, washing away seven weeks of dust. Pouring into the rain barrels, better late than never. I should have felt trapped in that small room, forced by the elements into your sullen vicinity; I should have resented every inch of space your body occupied. "Why you?"

You smiled then, though there was no joy in it; you drew your knees up, planting bare feet on the couch cushions. A hint of slender ankle, of downy dark-gold hair. "Because he thought I was somebody else," you said. The rain thrummed like an arrhythmia against the roof shingles. You closed your eyes and said nothing more.

Every morning I woke to find you gone. You were meticulous in your absence; the couch cushions were carefully rearranged, the blankets folded and replaced in the hall closet. You moved like a ghost, silent despite the creaking floorboards; the sun would rise, and you would already be gone.

In the first few days I would linger at the windows, squinting through the heat haze at distorted shapes; I would sit smoking on the porch as the sun crawled across the sky, watching shadows shift and lengthen. I didn't know if you would come back, at least in those first days; I found myself luxuriating in the space you left behind, glad of the silence but aware, unexpectedly, that something vital was missing. I would look up from my work and expect to feel your eyes on me; I would listen out for the hiss of your feet on dusty floorboards and hear only silence.

You returned as quietly as you left. The sun would slink behind the distant mountains and you would emerge from the deep shadows as though you'd been born there. I never saw you coming, no matter how long and how carefully I watched for you. You came in on the evening breeze, smiling that clever half-smile and you would pause at the door, an odd formality, waiting for me to invite you in. I always did.

I never asked you where you'd been.

We sat side by side on the porch, the air redolent with the musty wet-weather scent of the creosote bushes. Against a spilled-ink sky sat a spattered multitude of stars, their light guttering like faraway candles. I told you I could navigate using the stars as guidance; that it was one of the first things my father taught me as a young girl, my earliest lessons in preparedness.

I pointed up. "You locate the North Star," I said, plucking your hand from your lap. I guided your outstretched finger to where the North Star sat, bright and lonely. "You see? That's Polaris. And just across from there—those stars—that's the Big Dipper."

"The Great Bear," you said, and pulled my hand along with yours as you traced the shape in the sky, a wide, faltering oblong. "She's monstrous, bigger than any bear you've ever seen. And those four stars-" punctuating each one with the tip of your finger, as though they were mere yards away "- those are pissed-off mother coyotes chasing her across the sky. My mom told me that. She said that in those days, food was scarce, and the bear had grown so hungry that she would dig up coyote dens to eat the pups. And even though the coyotes were weak and hungry and scared to death of that bear, they vowed that they would fight to protect their babies. So when the Great Bear came sniffing around, they joined together, these four fierce coyote mothers, and they chased her. They chased her for so long and so far that when they stopped to catch their breath, they realised they'd run right up into the sky."

"I've never heard it told like that before."

"It was my mom's version." You drew your hands to your chest, long fingers forming a lattice across your heart. "My dumbass sisters never listened to her stories."

"You don't get on with your family?"

"My mom died. My sisters…we don't see eye to eye. I guess I don't like the way they live."

I let out a snort of bitter laughter. "I know how that feels."

"I listened to all my mom's stories. I liked that we saw the stars differently to everyone else. And I guess now…" you were dazzling in the dark, eyes like Baltic amber set into the pale bronze of your skin; you were a small and perfect sun, and I was willingly subsumed by your gravity. "I guess you do too, don't you?"

I smiled. I felt like you'd given me something of yourself then, a small gift by which I might begin know you. I looked up at the Great Bear, at the four coyote mothers chasing her in perpetuity through the heavens, and wondered who you were, where you'd been all this time, why you kept coming back to me.

The men came a few days later. They arrived in a rust-coloured station wagon, kicking up plumes of dust behind them like the tail of a comet. I stood out on the porch as they pulled up, piling out of the car in a tangle of identical plaid limbs and khaki vests.

I straightened my back, set my shoulders square. I didn't know any of them, though I had a vague sense that I'd seen one or two before—perhaps out at Wildrose, working the gas pumps or the campsite. Three of them, each with a rifle at their hip. Men on the hunt.

A tall, thin man stepped forward. "Afternoon ma'am." He tipped his cap, an antiquated notion of politeness. Beneath it, a sparse rim of sandy hair traced an oasis of sun-pink skin. "You live out here by yourself?"

"Yes, I do." None of them were the man who'd shot you, but I was wary all the same. Men like that, they travelled in packs, associated closely with one another; they wore their guns like membership badges. I didn't like the nature of his question, the way all three of them ran their eyes the length of my body, assessing me as though I were a prize sow. "Can I ask what it is you want?"

"Sorry to disturb you, miss," the second man said, with a wide-eyed humbleness I knew was feigned. My palms itched. I wished I'd brought my gun out with me. I wished I'd never have to touch the damn thing again. "Only there's been a situation down at the campsite. Some sort of animal going round hurting folk. Rabid, maybe. Killed a couple kids…"

"A couple?"

"Yes miss. Little girl got killed yesterday afternoon. Wandered out a little ways into the desert. Her momma never even knew she was gone 'til it was too late. Anyway, Bryson at the store said there was someone lived on her own out in the desert. He asked us to check on you, make sure you're able to protect yourself."

"I'm able," I said.

"We've seen coyotes heading out in this direction," the thin man said. "Could be there's a pack of them somewhere nearby. You'd best take care…"

"They say it's an animal," the third man said suddenly. "But nobody's got a lick of proof. Nobody's seen an animal do anything." His companions stared at him for a moment, uncertain how they ought to proceed; clearly, this was not the agreed story. "There's a lot of transients round here, is all I'm saying. It's damn near impossible to keep track of who's coming and going. You could do anything and nobody'd know so much as your name. You want my advice, ma'am, you'd be best off watching out for strangers."

I'm a grown woman, I thought, staring at the three of them, the earnest way they presented themselves; guns respectfully lowered, pink-cheeked and sweating like pigs beneath their heavy khakis. They thought me soft, I realised. They thought it a fluke that I'd survived this long. "I'll be careful," I told them. There was no acid in my voice; I burned with the desire to tell them to get the hell off my land, but I resisted. Better not to upset three armed men. "Thank you. I appreciate your good intentions. But you don't need to check up on me again. I've been looking after myself for a long time."

They scanned the distance as they piled back into the car, checking for motion, for shadows beneath the desert sun. I watched them leave, heading back the way they'd come, the car a bloodspot on the horizon. And I thought, better a pack of beasts than a pack of men with guns.

I didn't tell you about the men, but you knew anyway. You were quiet when you came back; you did not join me on the porch to smoke and stargaze, but curled up silent on the couch, blanket drawn over your head so that I could see only a vaguely human-shaped lump lying very still against the cushions.

The cloud cover was thick that night, the air heavy, foretelling rain. A dry wind had picked up, casting fistfuls of sand like a spiteful child. And I didn't feel safe out there on my own, staring into a distance

whose edges I could not discern; in which anyone or anything might be hiding. I shucked off my shoes in the hallway, locked the door behind me. As I passed by the couch my fingers brushed the crest of the blanket, where I supposed your face might be.

"I don't know you very well, June, but for what it's worth, I know you've got a good heart. I can feel that much." I drew my hand away, honouring the privacy of your cocoon. "I know they have you mistaken. I just wanted you to know that."

Sometime in the night I felt you crawl into the bed beside me, slow but determined in your audacity. I lay perfectly still as you slipped beneath the sheet, each movement cautious; I sensed the breath held in your lungs as you curled a hand around my arm, your knees pressed gently behind my own. I felt the tension of your muscles: apprehensive, but bold enough to persevere. I turned to face you, pulling you closer with great care. I feared I might crush you with the slightest movement. Your ribcage was sharp against my abdomen, the planes and angles of you a stark contrast to my softness, my roundness.

"Be careful out there tomorrow," I said, as though this sudden easy intimacy were normal. "There're men with guns sniffing around."

Your mouth pressed against mine. You had glass shards for teeth, wire for bones; your lips tasted like copper. My father's voice distant in my mind: it is an abomination for a man to lay with another man. I traced the braille of your spine with the tips of my fingers. Joke's on you, dad, I thought. Neither of us are men.

"Sadie, Sadie," you whispered, singsong. "Oh, Sadie, don't you know? I was born careful. I've been careful all my life."

Every day I feared your absence less and less; you were like the tide, receding into the gloaming, returning again as the sun set. I had not planned for the eventuality that, someday, you might not come back; curiously, I had no desire to prepare for it. It was as though after a life spent preparing fastidiously for a future that might never come, I had finally learned to absorb the present; you had taught me, somehow, that the sum total of my existence could not be pared

down to numbers on a spreadsheet: how many tins, how many bullets, how fast I could run, how many weeks I might survive.

Sadie, you sang. I loved the way my name sounded in your mouth, the warm gravel of your voice lilting. I was born careful. Born lucky too, perhaps, because those men never found you, though I saw them on the road once or twice. They would nod, in greeting or in solidarity, and I would nod back, though I would sooner have driven on without acknowledgement.

"Can you run?" you asked me one night, perhaps a week after the men had stopped by. You were wrapped in a knitted blanket; a sharp breeze swept in from the mountains, a familiar whistling in the eaves, heralding the very beginnings of winter.

A cigarette stub glowed between the tips of my fingers, heat licking at the calluses. "When I was ten," I said, propping myself up against the headboard, "I was so physically fit I could do five hundred pushups in one session. I could run a mile in six minutes. I'd even go to bed with my sneakers on in case the world went to shit in the middle of the night and I'd have to run for my life."

"That's kind of fucked up."

"Yeah," I said. "Yeah, it is."

"But how about now?" You indicated the dying cigarette at my lips; you glossed over the heaviness of my thighs, the thickness of my waist, though they must have crossed your mind. "Could you run now? If you had to, I mean?"

The question sat heavy on my tongue, forbidden but always present. A ghost between us. Your face was drawn, eyes wide and anxious and beautiful. "June," I said, crushing the remnants of my cigarette between thumb and forefinger. Ash scattered the bedsheet, a thin grey snowfall. "What is it they think you've done?"

There came a strangled cry from outside, the sound of an animal caught unaware; the back of my neck prickled. We both turned our heads, staring out of the window at the darkened scrub. "Not what I've done," you murmured. "What I am."

"I don't understand."

"Listen." Your hands clasped my face, urgent. "I need you to know that what you see, right here—this is the truth. This is what's real. Do you believe me?"

You were so close I could see myself reflected in the black of your pupils. "June-"

"Whatever else I may be. Whatever anyone says. This-" You drew my head gently towards you; your lips were velvet against my forehead, your teeth hard behind them. "-all of this. I swear, Sadie. I'd give everything away just to keep this."

Everything you were to me had been pieced together; you were a loose-stitched patchwork of intuition, of little stories and guesswork. And I loved you, somehow, despite your insubstantiality; you cast no shadow, left no footprints, but the warmth of your body and the salt taste of your skin mattered far more. I wrapped my arms around you, the curve of your skull delicate beneath my chin. Your hair smelled like gasoline. I wondered where you'd been. "I see you, June," I said, after a time. "I believe you."

"It's not their fault." Barely audible. "My poor sisters. They're so hungry."

I smoothed your hair back, glancing down at your face. "Your sisters?" I asked, but you said nothing more. Your eyes were closed, your mouth a slack, sleepy line. Perhaps you'd been dreaming aloud.

The bed sagged a little under our combined weight; I lay quietly, listening to your breathing deepen; my beloved stranger, dreaming strange, sunlit dreams. I held your bones close and let my eyes slip shut.

I will always remember the look on your face when I saw you standing there, neck stretched, pulse throbbing in that vital spot beneath your jaw; the edge of a knife pressed against your throat just hard enough to break the skin. The man's grip tight on your arm, fingers buried deep in your flesh. I will always remember the spark in your eye: not fear but fury, acute as any knife-edge. It was barely dawn. I stood helpless, desperate to tear you from his grip but unarmed, unprepared.

"I said you ought to be careful." The .204 Ruger hung from his left shoulder; his right hand held the knife against your carotid. "Said there were vicious animals out there. Do you have the faintest clue what you've let into your home?"

"What I know is none of your goddamn business." I'd woken to the sound of shattering glass, a door being kicked in; your scream still echoed in my skull, ricocheting back and forth. I thought I'd lost you. I knew I still might. "I don't know where you get off hurting women–"

He spat. "She ain't a woman. Ain't even a person. What, she never told you?" Lips pulled back, a rictus sneer. His free hand yanked a clump of your hair, snapping your head sharply back; you let out a pained yelp. "Never even told your friend here the truth? What you and your bitch sisters have done?"

"Let her alone–"

"Watch," he said, brow knotted in disgust. "You just watch."

I could do nothing else. I watched as he dragged you by the hair, pulled you towards the shattered window, your bare feet dancing over broken glass; you shrank away from the sunlight, writhing wildly in his grip, and for the briefest of moments his balance faltered. Barely a second, but it was enough. Your teeth tore into his thick white throat; your fingers anchored in his hair, pulling him down, dragging him through the open doorway and onto the porch. He fought, but you were terrible in your persistence; his fingers spasmed, clutching ineffectually at your hair, your face. The knife clattered to the floor. In the darkness you were a girl, a furious girl with blood spilling like water from your mouth; in the sunlight I saw the truth. You were a thin, ragged animal, a starving coyote tearing the throat of a grown man as easy as paper. As you moved through that sun-dappled room you were liquid: shadow-girl, sun-dog; your pelt shone russet in the warm light, your skin smooth in the shade. Hot blood streamed from crimson lips, glistened on sharp ivory teeth, changing and warping as the sun rose, illuminating the truth of you.

At last, he slumped to the ground, and he did not move again.

In a pool of shade you stood up, all torn feet and trembling legs. You wiped your mouth with the back of your hand, streaking gore

down your face, into your hair. I imagined I could hear the railroad clatter of your heart.

"Do you see me, Sadie?"

You were wild-eyed and trembling, but you were not afraid. You were a world away from the frightened, wounded girl I'd met outside Wildrose. You held your palms out to me. This is what's real: you, sleeping in my arms; your legs wrapped around mine, skin slick with sweat, your lips grazing my jaw. The sound of my name in your mouth. I swallowed, thick-throated. "I see you," I said.

There came the low hum of a car engine approaching. I turned. The rust-red station wagon was coming up the dirt road.

"Run with me," you said.

And we ran. You weaved through the shadows, into the light; you were a girl on torn feet, a swift coyote with the wind in your pelt. The hardpan stung my bare soles, the sun hot already at my back; my lungs burned with the effort and still there was such a long way to go. We had no plan, no destination, and perhaps we would fail, but for now we would run, and it seemed to me—breathless, exhilarated—that nothing in my life had been as pure, as perfect as this singular moment of freedom.

OBSIDIAN

Aino goes missing on the coldest night of the year.

Pihla leaves her sister unsupervised for six minutes. It shouldn't be enough time for Aino to climb from her bed, pull on her snow boots and overcoat and disappear, but when Pihla returns, wet hair cocooned in the folds of a radiator-warmed towel, Aino's bedsheets have been tossed aside, and she is nowhere to be found.

The bedroom window is wide-open; a sharp breeze tugs at the curtains. They are on the third floor, and the drop to the ground is sheer. It's hard to believe that Aino—brittle as bone china—could have survived the drop. Below, something moves. A shadow flits between the streetlights: spindle-legged, moving with a spider's swift, careful gait. Pihla throws on her coat and boots, pulls a woollen hat on and runs outside. Her feet thunder in the stairwell. She reaches the bottom, spinning out into the street. The streetlights glow a serene gold. The street is empty.

Apprehension boils in Pihla's stomach. Her mind is alive with possibilities, each more awful than the last. And in there too, smaller but infinitely denser, is the certainty of her mother's anger. A single responsibility, unfulfilled for six minutes, and now this: Aino, gone from her sickbed and spirited away into the evening gloom. *She can't have gone far,* Pihla reasons, as she breaks into a sprint. The road leads out of town, towards the lake and beyond, where tall firs line the roads and the darkness is broken only by the sweep of passing headlights. There isn't anywhere for Aino to go. Pihla sees in her mind a flash of powder-lilac coat motionless at the roadside; blood like scattered rubies in the snow.

The doctors say that Aino has epilepsy, that her wide-eyed absences and waking dreams are because something in her brain isn't working quite the way it should. Pihla is fourteen. She is no scientist, no doctor; she conceives of the brain only as a pink, rubber-ridged object contained within the skull. And yet she doesn't believe the doctors when they talk about Aino's brain as though it is a piece of defective machinery. Whatever is wrong with Aino lies far deeper, beneath the skin and bones of her, the fluids and tissues. Pihla believes this with the unerring certainty of youth, and of sisterhood. "Aino!"

The pavement is slick with ice. By sheer force of will, Pihla stays upright, legs chaotic as she runs. The January chill nips at her skin, leeching the residual warmth of her shower; the blood rises in her cheeks, a livid flush. Aino's name burns in her throat, and the calm she has worked so hard to maintain is splitting at the seams, crumbling like an old carapace. In its place there is only raw panic. She skids to an unsteady halt at the intersection, scanning for any flicker of motion.

Their mother will be back from work soon, and she'll know.

"Aino!" Desperation renders the final syllable shrill, echoing like a bird's cry. She pivots on her heel, lifts her hand to shield the sudden glare of passing high-beams. As the van flashes by, almost silent on the ice, there's a rustle of motion in the trees across the road. Pihla glimpses red snow boots disappearing into the undergrowth.

She bolts into the road. Luck alone enables her to clear the kerb before a navy-blue Ford Fiesta, horn blaring, skids to a halt inches away. Pihla doesn't stop to apologise. She pushes through the damp foliage with both hands, clawing at the frost-stiff branches, her ears ringing. For a moment she is lost, the pungent scent of rotting bark heavy in the cold air, and the entire world is slanted, canting mercilessly downwards as Pihla pushes on, finally emerging wet-faced and breathless on the other side.

The lake is a silent black mirror. Pihla stumbles down the bank, stopping just shy of the shore. The pebbles are embossed with a filigree of ice, birthday-cake delicate. A few metres up shore is Aino, crouched and perfectly still, a lavender ghost against the treeline.

Quietly, Pihla picks her way around the lake's frozen rim, taking great care, as though Aino is a skittish animal liable to bolt at her

approach. If Aino sees her, she does not react. Her large, dull eyes are fixed on some point in the distance, her lips slightly parted, as though in silent prayer. Pihla crouches beside her, close enough to hear the mucous rattle of Aino's chest as she breathes. "You mustn't run off like that," Pihla says, forcing herself to speak quietly, to breathe evenly. What she wants is to grab Aino by the shoulders, to shake her so hard that whatever is loose inside her head might snap back into place. She wants to yell, the way Äiti will yell when she gets home. She wants to wrap Aino in her arms and never let her go, because the world is too big and too cold, and Aino is so small. "Aino? You must never do that. What if you fell down and nobody knew you were here?"

For a moment Aino is very still, and Pihla thinks she must be having another of her absent episodes. But Aino draws in a long, wet-lunged breath and she says, "I heard someone singing."

"When?"

"Before you came. Out there—" she raises a doll-delicate hand, and Pihla traces the trajectory out onto the lake. Aino isn't wearing gloves; the tips of her fingers are a bloodless white. "They sounded so sad."

Pihla takes Aino's hands in her own, numb skin against numb skin. "It was only a dream," Pihla says, breathing warm onto their entwined fingers. Although there is almost five years between them, everyone says they look alike. They have the same snub of a nose, the same small rosebud mouth. The same wispy hair, though Pihla's is much longer. "You're not supposed to go on the ice alone, do you remember?"

"I wasn't *going* to," Aino says, a little petulantly. And then—lifting her face, a silvery rivulet of mucus tracing the curve of her philtrum—"But anyway, they were singing *under* the ice, and you can't get down there even if you try."

Pihla sighs. There is no sense in arguing with Aino's trances. Her sense of reality is distorted, her waking dreams woven into the fabric of every day so seamlessly that it is impossible to convince her that certain events haven't actually happened. Aino believes herself an oracle, a conduit for the magical and the strange, and she believes this not with the lunatic conviction of a man who swears he's seen aliens

flying over the Baltic, but with the quiet, unwavering certainty of one for whom God unequivocally exists. Aino isn't an oracle, though. She is a sick little girl. That's all. Pihla stands. Tugs at Aino's cold little hand. "Come on," she says. Her voice seems very loud in the silence, echoing out over the smoked-glass lake. In the far distance, the stars have begun to cluster in the sky. "Äiti will be worried about you."

By the time they get home Aino is limp and shivering despite her coat and boots; her face is ashen save for the livid fever-flush blooming across her cheeks, creeping up her forehead. Äiti is waiting for them at the open door, jaw tight with worry. Pihla deposits their shoes in the hall, throws their coats over the stand. When she enters the living room, their mother is stripping the damp pyjamas from Aino's frail body, testing her temperature with a gentle hand to the cheek. She encourages Aino to stretch out on the sofa, propping her head up with cushions.

"Blanket," Äiti says.

Äiti hasn't shouted at her yet, but Pihla knows she's cross. Her terse commands and stiff marionette motion forecast a coming storm. Pihla fetches the woollen blanket from the airing cupboard and watches in mute contrition as Äiti tucks it around Aino's bare limbs. A damp blue flannel rests on her forehead.

"You have a little bit of a fever," Äiti tells Aino, stroking her hair, "from all of the excitement. Will you promise to rest now, for your Äiti?"

Aino nods her agreement. Half-hidden beneath the flannel, her eyelids slip shut; blue-veined, almost translucent, like the tail of a pink fish. Äiti unfolds from her crouch, knees clicking. For a moment, their eyes meet, and Pihla's gut constricts in fearful anticipation. There is no anger in her mother's face, though, no steel in her red-rimmed eyes. She is grey, and heavy-limbed, and too tired to shout. She walks by without a word. Somehow, the silent weight of her disappointment feels worse than any rebuke.

There is frost on the inside of the windowpanes when Pihla gets up for school. She sits with the blankets puddled around her knees, tracing the ridges; an alien topography through which the moon still glows, white and bloated, like something drowned beneath the ice.

She slips out of bed. She can hear her mother's gentle snoring through the gap in Aino's door; Äiti is a soft, rounded shape in the grey dark, bundled in blankets on the floor. Sometimes, when Aino's episodes are especially bad, her mother takes days off work. And sometimes, when Äiti can't afford to take any more days off, she tells Pihla to skip school so she can watch Aino. Pihla likes these days. She reads Aino stories, and they play board games, and it's okay if Aino has a seizure because Pihla knows exactly what to do now. It makes her feel like an adult, to be trusted with this responsibility.

Everybody in town knows about Äiti. Poor Marjo Viitala, whose husband died and left her with a sick daughter. Nobody ever talks about it, though; nobody ever offers to help. They don't consider it any of their business. They pretend they don't notice how tired Äiti looks all the time, how she drags herself from one place to another. They barely notice that Pihla exists at all.

Pihla dresses for school in the dark. She pours herself a bowl of cereal which she eats alone in the quiet kitchen, listening to the rhythmic grinding of her teeth as she chews, swallows, begins again. She washes her bowl and spoon so Äiti won't have to do it later, running the water at the barest trickle. She almost drops the spoon in the sink; she fumbles to catch it, cringing inwardly at the dull clatter. She won't be responsible for disturbing Aino's rest. She's made enough of a mess of things. Her boots sit neatly on the shoe-stand in the hall. She slips them on and unlatches the door. She breathes white into the dark morning, watching sparse snowflakes dance in the orange glow of the streetlamps. The door clicks quietly behind her as she leaves, school-bag slung over her shoulder. Down the stairs, slowly this time, mindful of the ice at the bottom. Looking up, she sees Aino, hair chaotic, one side of her sleep-crumpled face pressed against her bedroom window, as though she's listening to something only she can hear.

During maths, Ms. Lehtinen takes Pihla aside, out into the corridor. "Your mother called," she says, pushing her thick-rimmed glasses up her nose with one finger. Ms. Lehtinen has a soft, doughy face and a red nose, like pastry with a blob of jam. She smells of frost and cigarettes. It makes Pihla's nose wrinkle. "She asked if you could come home early today."

Pihla forces herself to stand upright, to breathe deep and inhale the nicotine stink emanating from Ms. Lehtinen's jumper. She knows, without knowing, that Aino has gone missing again. "Honestly, I would prefer you to stay in school," Ms. Lehtinen says. When she frowns, her entire face crumples. "You've been absent a lot this year. I'm concerned that you're falling very behind…"

Pihla tries to listen, but the inside of her mind has become a movie theatre for worst-case scenarios. She thinks of Aino by the lake, stepping out onto the ice. She thinks of the fissure spreading beneath her feet, the gunshot crack of ice splitting. She thinks of her sister disappearing into the black water as a shooting star might fade out into a clear night sky.

"I'm sorry," she mumbles, moving past Ms. Lehtinen with her head down. "I have to go home now." She doesn't stop to collect her schoolbag from her desk. Behind her, she hears Ms. Lehtinen sigh.

Pihla does not go home.

She does not run either, though her limbs twitch with the need. It's a long walk from school to the lake and as her grim march takes her up through the town, past the church and the K-Market and the apartment blocks, the daylight begins to fail. A blueish, subaquatic gloom sets in. She knows that behind her, the sun is setting, casting fingers of pink light out into the clouds as it sinks beneath the horizon. Snow will come again tonight—proper snow, so that Äiti will have to dig the car free if she wants to go anywhere. By then, she and Aino

will be home, and there will be hot blackcurrant juice on the stove, and it can snow all it wants because they will be warm and safe.

But right now Aino is neither warm nor safe, and that's Pihla's fault. There are too many dots to connect, and Pihla connects only those she can see: she draws a mental line between her moment of irresponsibility and Aino disappearing out into the freezing night in her pyjamas, alone. And another line, bigger and blacker, between this and Aino's present illness, this new disappearance. She has to make amends. She has to know Aino is safe.

By the time Pihla reaches the lake she is sweating despite the deepening cold. There isn't much light; the moon is obscured, and the summer cottages at the far end of the lake are quiet and empty now, gathering dust until the sun returns in late spring.

"Aino!" Pihla's voice echoes briefly before being swallowed by the darkness. There are no footprints in the frost-stiff grass. No shadows in the corner of her eye. Her breath plumes white between slightly parted lips. Everything is still. For a long moment she stands there, wondering if her instincts were wrong, somehow. Maybe they found Aino already. Maybe she never left home in the first place. And then she hears someone singing.

The voice is beautiful. Low and melancholy, it sweeps towards the shore, echoing in the trees. Pihla imagines this is the sound the Northern Lights would make if they ever sang. As she listens, awestruck, something small and pale rises in the water, billowing up beneath the ice a few metres from shore. Pihla is close enough to see the shape of a hand, a pentacle of slender white fingers pressing against the underside of the ice. The flash of a lavender coat.

Snippets of childhood ice safety cartoons spool out in her head as she dives out onto the lake. She doesn't have her *jäänaskalit* spikes—if the ice opens up beneath her, she'll have no way of getting back out—but she's barely aware of the risk, certain as she is that Aino is floating beneath the black glass, freezing or drowning or both. Slowly, her sister drifts, drawn on some unseen current, hair spilling out like a spun gold jellyfish. Pihla falls to her knees, pressing exposed palms against the ice; the song is so loud now she can feel it thrumming

in her bones, resonating in the auditorium of her skull. And as the crescendo builds she realises Aino is beginning to sink.

Her cry of frustration is lost in the music. Her bunched fists rain blows on the ice. She kicks out with her heels, throwing her entire meagre weight at it. She howls, furious; her voice joins the chorus, and for one brief, breathless moment, she and the song are one. The ice beneath her is obsidian, smooth and dark and impenetrable. Her veins are alive with fire, her ears bursting with sound. Her fists descend over and over; skin splits across sharp knuckles, blood spattering garnet-bright against the ice. Abruptly, the singing stops.

Pihla raises her trembling hands to her face. She is suddenly aware of the cold, of how badly her torn skin stings. The ice is unmarred save for the vermillion smear of her blood. In the total absence of sound she feels terribly empty, as though she has been tipped up and poured out and nothing is left but the shell of her. She realises, a little uneasily, that she desperately wants to hear the song again.

"Pihla!"

Her stomach shrinks. This is no song she wants to hear; this is blame and disappointment, the sound of home. Pihla pulls herself to her knees, pressing her injured hands against her coat as she turns to peer towards shore. Äiti's voice is louder than she's ever heard it, and there's a peculiar shrillness which Pihla distantly recognises is hysteria. And why not? Her eldest daughter is crouched on a frozen lake, and the front of her coat is stained bright red. Pihla slowly rises to her feet.

"Be careful," Äiti pleads. Her dark hair is a wild tangle beneath her hat, her boots barely fastened. Even from this distance, Pihla can see the tears glistening on her cheeks. Does she already know about Aino? Did she watch as her youngest daughter sank into the lightless depths of the lake?

Pihla reaches shore at last. The sensation of rocks underfoot is alien. She longs for the perfect smoothness of the ice. "I'm sorry," she says, unable to look at her mother. Sadness burns in the space behind her eyes. Her knuckles ache miserably. "I tried, Äiti, honestly I did…"

"Ssh," Äiti says, running cold-stiff fingers through Pihla's hair. It almost feels comforting. "It doesn't matter now. Let's go home, Pihla. Why on Earth are you here? It's only going to get colder, and I've

left Aino on her own. She'll wake up soon, and she's been waiting for you to come home."

The bandages swaddling her hands are clumsily wrapped. Pihla picks compulsively at a frayed edge, pausing occasionally when the hushed conversation in Äiti's room grows loud enough for her to hear. Beside her is Aino, serene in sleep, unharmed and entire. Her mother's voice floats in and out of earshot, punctuated by the low, soothing tones of her täti Lilja, who has driven miles from Oulu to help. Pihla strokes Aino's hair with awkward fingers, catching sentences as they drift in like old wood on the spring tide. "…wasn't even near the lake, Lilja, why would she think that?"

"Perhaps it's only stress? People do strange things…"

"Did you see what she did to her hands? *Perkele*. I already have one sick daughter. How am I supposed to cope with another?"

"Oh Marjo, I'm sure she's not…"

Pihla scrunches her toes up inside her socks, pressing her hands to her ears. She hates the sound of her mother crying: great, wrenching sobs, as if all the sadness inside her is being squeezed out. She put that sadness there, she and Aino together, and now it's bedding in, setting roots deep in Äiti's bones.

"I would have stopped at one," Äiti says between sobs. There's a terrible bitterness in her voice. Pihla imagines the redness of her eyes, the wry slant of her lips and the clenched teeth behind. "If I'd known all of this was going to happen, I would only have had one."

Aino's bed is small, but neither of them is big. Pihla crawls in beside her sister, surprised at the warmth emanating from Aino's tiny body. She tugs the blanket up, scooting closer to the wall. She mustn't disturb Aino, who needs her sleep so she can get better.

Pihla stares up at the window above the bed. The curtains are drawn, but a sliver of ink-blue sky is visible between them. The clouds are thick tonight, and the snow is descending in sheets, spiralling down so quickly that it is impossible to differentiate one flake from another. By morning even the lake will be lost under the white.

"He's lonely," Aino mumbles.

"What?" Pihla rolls onto her side. The pillow smells of Aino: clean skin, talcum powder. No trace of brackish water.

"Vetehinen." Aino's eyes are closed. Pihla isn't sure if she's sleep-talking. "He lives in the lake. He's all alone down there. Didn't you know? He doesn't have anybody to talk to."

"Who is Vetehinen?"

"Listen," Aino says. "Can you hear him singing?"

Pihla listens. And under the gentle hiss of Aino's breathing, weaving through the ambient sounds of midnight, comes his song. And she hears it so clearly, as though he's here beside her, crooning into her ear, as if she is out on the lake again, the song buzzing in her skull like a rush of blood to the head. If this Vetehinen is another of Aino's delusions, how can Pihla possibly feel his loneliness as acutely as a wound?

"I saw you," Pihla says. Her hand seeks Aino's beneath the blanket, clasping her tiny fingers in the cup of one bandaged palm. "You were in the water. I tried to rescue you but I couldn't get through the ice. I saw you drown, Aino."

For a long instant the only sound is Vetehinen, singing his loneliness miles below the surface. Is Äiti right, Pihla wonders? Is this a madness shared between the both of them? Are they two halves of the same defective brain?

"I didn't drown, silly," Aino says, and curls up beside Pihla as if to prove it. She is warm and solid. The curve of her spine juts through the thin flannel of her nightshirt; each vertebra digs into Pihla's arm, smooth and hard as a row of pebbles. "He wants me to go to him. Go live with him on the bottom of the lake. He says it's pretty there. He wants me to be his friend."

"But then you'll drown for sure."

"He promised I wouldn't." She opens her eyes then, fixing her gaze on Pihla's face with a gravity belying her seven years. She looks all at once impossibly old and very, very young. "He promised he'd make me well again," she says, and she falters, just a little, as though acknowledging her illness stings her. "Äiti would be so happy, wouldn't she? If Vetehinen could fix me? She could go to work, and you could stay in school, and…"

"You don't need fixing," Pihla says. Gently, she pulls Aino to her, pressing her face against her sister's hair. She is little more than bones and a beating heart and a beautiful, muddled brain, but that is enough. "You're not broken, Aino."

Äiti and Lilja are silent now. The whole apartment seems to be holding its breath; a great, collective tension. "You don't need to be fixed," Pihla whispers, pressing a playful finger to the tip of Aino's nose. "Because you're an oracle, aren't you? How would we get by without you?"

In the stillness of 3 a.m. Pihla rises. She climbs out of bed, shifting a sleeping Aino very gently aside. The silence is brittle; she feels as though she might shatter it with the slightest misstep. She slips out into the hall, soles kissing the laminate. She slips her snow boots onto her bare feet, shrugging her coat on over her pyjamas. She won't be outside for very long.

She closes the door as quietly as she can. A fierce wind whips at her hair, stealing the breath from her lungs. Snow swirls wildly in the glow of the streetlights, sharp against her skin. She huddles into her jacket, shoving her bandaged hands in her pockets. Pihla does not look back as she walks. If she looks back, she knows her resolve will crack. She pretends there is no home behind her. That her mother and sister are at the summer cabin by the lake, curled up before the fire. She wants to believe she's going to join them, that they'll all be together in that little log house while the snow falls all around them. In the dim moonlight she is a grey, hunched shape moving swiftly through the white. The roads are empty, the snow undisturbed. This time is alien to her. Pihla does not recall ever seeing the world on the cusp of waking before, this still and sacred time when all but the most persistent insomniacs are dreaming. She finds the total silence appalling. It feels as if the entire world has died while she was sleeping. By the time morning comes her footprints will have been erased completely.

She expects to see the lake blanketed in snow but when she arrives, finally—shivering with a convulsive violence—it is so dark and so clear that Pihla wonders for a moment whether a great rift has opened in the earth. "Vetehinen," she calls, but quietly, so that the wind snatches the words from the air and carries them away. Lying beside Aino she had been full of conviction, certain that this was the right thing to do. But now she's here, staring out at the abyssal darkness of the lake, she is no longer sure. She doesn't know how deep the lake is, but she thinks it's probably a long way to the bottom.

I am not doing this for me, she reminds herself, tightening her scabbed knuckles into twin fists, and somehow that feels better. "Vetehinen!" Louder this time, braver, though her voice quavers on the last syllable. She straightens her spine, plants her feet in the thick powder on the shore. Pihla stands tall, asserting her thin, awkward girl's body. "I've come to speak with you."

Silence. She is so cold now. It seems that the very bones of her are rimed with frost. She fears that the slightest movement might shatter her.

"Please," she says.

It happens very quickly. A seam appears in the ice, bright as lightning, scoring a path towards shore. The ice shies back from the seam, a smoked glass door sliding open. The space beneath is devoid of light, but as Pihla approaches she realises there is no water inside. The exposed lakebed slopes gently downwards for a few metres before dropping quite suddenly. Beyond this point, the darkness is absolute. Cautiously, Pihla steps beneath the ice shelf.

The air tastes brackish; the sour salt tang of it feels like blood in her mouth. The ground underfoot is soft and damp. Her boots slide in the mud, and she moves tentatively, slowly, holding her blue-tipped fingers out before her as darkness closes over her like a cataract. Her hands brush against a smooth, cold wall. She follows it up, around, tracing a solid arch overhead with the pad of her middle finger. The tunnel is easily wide enough to accommodate her, but her chest constricts with a sudden claustrophobia. She thinks of the vast night sky high above, the sheer surface of the lake below it. She is alone on

the bottom of the lake, and she does not know what is holding all that black, freezing water at bay.

She can hear the hiss of her own panicked respiration, the tinny oxygen-tank echo of a hospital ward. Her feet carry her blindly onwards and she's certain that if she stops moving she will sink slowly into the mud. *Oh Aino,* she thinks. *You told me it would be pretty down here, but there's nothing at all.*

"Vetehinen," Pihla says, though she can barely force the words past her cold-stiff lips. "I've come to make a bargain." She does not sound confident. She sounds small, diminished; her resolve is beginning to rot and she's afraid he'll be able to smell it on her. She lifts her chin. Breathes deep, quelling the tremble in her throat. "I've come to talk to you about Aino."

In the near distance there is a sudden spark; a blue-green sunburst spills out overhead, a petrol trail slowly igniting. All around her, ripples of deep-sea phosphorescence illuminate this strange passage at last, and her terror evaporates along with the darkness. A peal of laughter escapes her lips, eyes wide with delight. The tunnel is not a tunnel at all but a chamber, a great vaulted hall wrought crudely in ice. With this new illumination she can see the steely glimmer of fish trapped inside the thick, glassy walls. And high above, at the very apex of this impossible ceiling, the aurora dances with slow, sinuous grace. "Come closer, please." Not a song, but a request. Pihla tears her gaze from the lights and sees, for the first time, the creature who sits cross-legged in the centre of the chamber.

His profile is cast in green, a sharp-edged emerald. He is a naked, sexless thing, fish-belly pale, his hair long and dark. A spattering of pearlescent scales freckle his thighs, increasing in number until, just below the sharp jut of his knees, his skin becomes entirely silver. He looks up at her approach, bringing his face into the light. Even to her naïve fourteen-year-old eye he is beautiful; as perfect and remote as a glacier. Lonely Vetehinen, who sings his sadness deep below the ice.

"I won't let you take Aino away," Pihla says, looking him square in the eye. She is not afraid any more, not of this sad, monstrous man. Not in this place. He may have beauty and song but she has warm flesh and hot blood. She has determination. She has to be brave

for Aino. "She's too young, and too sick. And anyway, Äiti needs her, because she's lonely too."

Vetehinen is still. His eyes are unblinking, dark slits in the raw marble of his skull.

"So I've come in her place." She extends her hands, tips up her palms, half obscured by raggedy bandages, and still he stares; not consuming her with his gaze the way men sometimes do, greedy in their interest, but with something akin to wonder, as though she is a minor phenomenon. "I'll keep you company. Forever, if you like. But I have one condition." She holds his gaze, defiant. "You have to make Aino well again, as you told her you would. You have to promise me that. And then I'll be yours."

He smiles. His teeth are stubs of coral, small and sharp. "You could have refused," he says. "It was a request, never an obligation. Why come to me? Why offer yourself?"

Pihla thinks of Äiti's grey face, her dull eyes and drooping, defeated shoulders. She thinks of Aino wrapped in a blanket, Äiti smoothing her fever-damp hair from her forehead, and the guilt heavy inside of her. Her mother's words in her head, over and over like a mantra: *I would only have had one.*

"Because I want my family to be happy," she says, without hesitation. "And I only have myself to give in return."

Vetehinen uncurls, getting slowly to his feet. He is taller than Pihla expected, his limbs almost unnaturally long. His body is smooth and featureless, the bleached bed of a dead ocean. His legs are frail, strung with wasted muscles as though he is not used to walking on dry land. As though it hurts him to do so. He opens his arms to her, and she goes to him. Pihla watches wordlessly as he scoops both of her hands up in his, unwinding the bandages. The scabbed flesh of her knuckles peels away with the fabric; her skin wells with bright, fresh blood as he brings her fingers to his lips. "Then I promise," he tells her. She gazes past him, at the aurora undulating overhead and the trapped fish glinting in the black ice, a strange constellation. At the way the sweeping arc of the roof is beginning to tremble as though under a terrible pressure.

"My name is Pihla," she says.

The apex of the ceiling begins to bow. Thousands of hairline cracks shoot through the ice, making strange, crystalline music. Inside the walls, the fish are beginning to move. Vetehinen's chamber is melting.

"Don't be afraid, Pihla." Vetehinen tells her, and when he smiles he almost looks kind. "You won't drown as long as you're with me. I promise that, too."

He folds his arms around her as the walls begin to disintegrate, showering bright shards the size of a man's fist. Up close, she can see the individual strands of his hair, a glossy thicket of kelp streaming over his shoulders. His skin is warm, like smooth river rock baked in the summer sun.

"Will you sing?" Pihla asks, "so that Aino knows I'm safe?"

Liquid spills from the cracks in the walls. The ceiling groans, echoing loud in the chamber; her muscles tense with sudden fear, though she does not want to be afraid. She wants to trust Vetehinen. And then, faintly at first, rising above the cacophony of shifting, shattering ice, he begins to sing. Not melancholy, now, but euphoric: a song of joy, emanating from the very core of him. Vetehinen shields her frail human body with his own, enveloping her in a cocoon of fish-skin and bone and jubilant music. She wonders if Aino can hear him, safe and warm in her bed. She wonders if Aino understands. The waters of the lake finally burst through the walls, filling her mouth, her nose. She chokes, fighting and thrashing, her last breath burning inside her chest. Pihla feels Vetehinen's hands either side of her face, gentle; she sees him through the murky water, a beautiful monster, inciting her to breathe. His mouth forms silent words. She understands perfectly: *I promise.*

Pihla opens her mouth. Fills her lungs with lake water. She does not drown.

RED RABBIT

When Rina dreams, it's of Arizona, and the smell of dead men in the hot sun.

They've stopped for the night in a motel somewhere off the interstate. Alexei is worn out from driving, and Rina is in no condition to take over. She and Alexei ease Sam onto the bed, sharing his dead weight between them. They wrap him in blankets that still smell, faintly, of someone else's cologne.

They leave Sam bundled on the bed like a chrysalis and sit on the hood of the stolen Chrysler convertible, which was once red and is now the insipid non-colour of the desert sky. The sun is setting, and the world is cast in the warm pastels of a child's bedroom. Rina squints out across the parking lot, at the thin haze of dust hanging above the asphalt.

"What happens now?" Rina asks. Her fingernails are thick with dried blood.

Alexei chews his lip. He fidgets ceaselessly, shifting his weight this way and that way until Rina starts to feel a little seasick. Her hand creeps into his lap, fingers tiptoeing in search of familiar skin.

"Alexei," she says.

He doesn't answer. He grips her hand so tightly that she can feel his fear, pulsing in his palm like the heart of some terrified animal.

In the beginning, it had been Alexei and Sam, and a blue sedan that had once belonged to Sam's father.

They'd picked Rina up on the third day, a little way out of Pocatello. She'd been reading a book in an old lawn chair, just sitting there alone on the front porch of a farmhouse that looked as if it had been empty for years. She wasn't from Idaho. She wasn't from anywhere, it seemed, this strange, soft-spoken girl with placid eyes and thin grasshopper limbs. Her hair was close-cropped and stuck out in wayward tufts like a pale gold corona.

"What're you reading?" Sam had asked.

She'd lifted the book up, fat with yellowing pages. "Cellular biology textbook. I found it in there." She waved a dismissive hand at the old farmhouse. "It was my brother's. He lived there once, in that house. Guess he doesn't anymore." She paused, contemplative. "Do you know what 'apoptosis' means?"

"No," said Sam. "I don't."

"Cell death. Cell suicide, actually," Rina said, although she hadn't been Rina then; just a girl in a lawn chair giving an impromptu biology lesson, the world's strangest street-corner preacher. "The cell disintegrates from the inside out. It breaks into tiny pieces,"—her pale hands danced wildly, as if in some excitable sign language—"bound in membrane, so they won't damage the other cells. Those little pieces are destroyed by phagocytes, quickly and efficiently. The body replaces the dead cell without so much as a pause. It's like it was never there at all."

Sam had looked at Alexei, bemused, and a little impressed.

Alexei had asked Rina if she knew how to drive.

Around three quarters of the way to Moab they stopped in a roadside diner.

"I don't know what the rabbits mean," Sam said, through great mouthfuls of quesadilla. His hands were glossy with grease. The smell of it made Rina's stomach growl. "All I know is, whoever's painting them is one step ahead of me. Always. Like they know exactly where I'm going to be."

"Red…rabbits?"

Sam looked at her like she was a slow child, with kindly pity, and nudged Alexei with an elbow. It startled him; he blinked a couple of times, stared blankly around the diner as if newly awoken.

"Just the face," Sam said, and took a pencil nub from his top pocket. He drew a rough outline on the back of a napkin, sharper than a rabbit's face should be; slits for eyes, ears like blades. "Sometimes on walls, sometimes on hydrants. Always the same face."

Alexei took in the conversation with what seemed to be a total lack of interest, watching as Rina tore the paper napkin into squares of confetti. They fluttered across the counter, delicate petals caught on the breeze.

"Look at us," Alexei said, after a time, and there was just a hint of bitterness in his smile. "Three Alices, following the rabbit down the hole." He looked back out the window, focusing on some interminable point in the distance. It seemed to Rina that he was not looking at anything in particular, but waiting.

A little further down the road they broke into a convenience store, jimmying up the shutters with a crowbar. They'd made off with two bottles of malt whisky and as much food as they could stuff down their shirts before the insistent wail of police sirens had forced them to make their escape.

Later that night, they drove out into the scrub and parked up by a lake. In the still heat of midnight they passed round the bottle and shared inconsequential snippets of their lives, stories none of them would remember later. A jaundiced half-moon hung lazily in the sky.

"Why do you follow them?" Rina asked. She felt the prickle of dry grass through her shirt as she lay on her back, sleepy with whisky. "The rabbits, I mean."

Alexei had little to say on the subject. He had little to say on any subject. What he did have were cheekbones sharp as piano wire, and a prickling of pink sunburn across the bridge of his nose. His expression was carefully blank. He stared out into the black distance, following unseen things with his eyes.

"They want me to follow," Sam said, "and I need to know why." He was close enough so Rina could feel the heat radiating from him like a fever. He smelled of whisky and dry earth, and he shifted uncomfortably, as if Rina's question had troubled him.

Alexei passed her the bottle. She took it without looking at him, drained the last of it in two long, gulping mouthfuls. The gentle burn of good liquor traced a path down her throat. "And if they stop?"

"When the rabbits stop, then so will we," Alexei said, and Rina turned to him, her face a pale sunflower seeking his voice. He sat in profile, outline smooth-sketched in gold. "Isn't that right, Sam?" His tone was coaxing, gentle, as if talking a man off a window ledge.

"Yes," Sam said, a single bitter syllable.

The next morning, all that remained of them was a smashed whisky bottle, fragments glistening in the hot sun like fat droplets of rain.

There were no rabbits in Moab.

The sky was the tired blue of old denim, the air dry. They stalked the midday streets, looking for a hint of their prey; the tip of a long, red ear, the smear of still-wet paint on the asphalt.

"We've got to keep moving," Sam said, pacing restlessly back and forth. His cheeks were livid with sunburn, corkscrew hair plastered damp to his forehead. "They did this on purpose. They're trying to throw us off. We can't let them."

"Sam," Alexei said, calm, though people had stopped to stare at them, these three strangers arguing by a dumpster under the full force of the midday sun. Rina offered them a small, placatory smile; they moved on, peering occasionally over their shoulders.

"We need to get back on the road," Sam continued. Alexei shot Rina the weary glance of an exhausted father dealing with a particularly difficult child. "There's no time. They're already ahead of us."

"Sam, listen to me."

This time, Sam did stop, and his expression was one of pure panic. His mouth was an unformed 'O' of protest, his body still, but tense, dangerous; a quivering tripwire threatening, at any moment, to snap.

A single drop of sweat ran the length of Rina's spine like a shiver.

"That's enough now, Sam," Alexei said. "Time to stop."

The effect was instantaneous. Sam burst into frantic motion, arms wind-milling, eyes flitting between Alexei and Rina like pinballs. "No," he said, a kicked-dog whine. "No, no, Alexei, no, I have to know, we can't stop now. They *chose* me."

"What if you never find out what it all means?" Alexei said.

They looked like gunslingers, Rina thought, absurdly; calm, poised Alexei facing off against wild-eyed Sam, falling to pieces in a Utah backstreet.

"Arizona," Sam pleaded. "Let's go to Arizona."

"And if there are no rabbits?"

"Then we stop." So earnest. The shuffle of feet against concrete, uncomfortable. There was not a grain of truth in it, and yet Alexei seemed appeased, the hard angles of his face softening a little. "I swear it, Alexei. We'll call it a day. We'll go home."

Later, while Sam slept, contorted awkwardly on the back seat of the sedan, she and Alexei talked, speaking in hushed, conspiratorial tones. They ran from the setting sun until it was a bloody splash on the horizon, leaking out into the sky.

"He's afraid," Alexei told her. "They started when his dad died. He thinks the rabbits are the only things keeping him alive. They're all he has. I have no idea what he'll do if they stop."

Rina watched his reflection in the rear-view mirror, the minute twitch of his jaw as he mentally ran through the potential consequences. His fingers were tightly wrapped around the steering wheel.

"Why does he think that?" she asked. "Is he sick?"

"In a way," Alexei said.

Rina idly flipped the pages of the mouldering road atlas. "Why did you go with him?"

There was a long pause, punctuated only by Sam's breathing, the gentle hiss of tires.

"Because he's all I have," Alexei said finally.

Rina rested her head against the window and closed her eyes. In the grey space of half-sleep she watched sharp-eyed shadows writhe and coalesce, taking familiar form; Sam's malevolent rabbit, all scimitar ears and great black mouth, a depthless fissure. A gaping wound, yawning, threatening to swallow her whole.

When apoptosis sets in, the body responds quickly, destroying all trace of the dead cell. It occurs to Rina that the brain does something like that with traumatic memories.

Rina remembers very little of what happened prior to Sam's breakdown. There were no rabbits in Flagstaff. She remembers Sam's growing agitation, his sharp, dystonic movements. His fevered mutterings, like an incantation.

"You made a promise, Sam," Alexei said.

Rina had expected some kind of tantrum. She had not expected Sam to turn on her, to wrap both hands around her throat and squeeze, so hard that the small bones seemed to collapse inwards.

"You did this," he told her. He sounded far away, a madman ranting in the next room. "You're hiding them from me. I should have known. I should have fucking *known*."

Through hot tears Rina saw the deep black slits of his eyes, his face flushed in fury, and the red rabbit was there, black-mouthed and screaming, crushing her paper-delicate throat. Her lungs were heavy in her chest, her hands lumpen and useless as they tore at Sam's fingers. What a strange end, she thought dimly, as her limbs went slack, the world dissolving into grey static; his death-grip was the only thing keeping her upright and where the fuck was Alexei?

And then there was air, so much air that Rina thought she might drown in it. She hit the ground, gasping. Her chest burned with the smell of hot creosote. Noise all around her, motion unfolding in bursts like a burnt-out movie reel. A flash of metal in the sunlight. Strange men shouting, and Sam babbling feverishly, a gun clasped in his trembling hands.

"Easy now, buddy," a voice said, and Rina looked up at the men who'd saved her. At the gleaming pistol trained between Sam's eyes. "Calm down, okay? Let's talk about this."

It all went to hell then, startlingly fast, and Rina would think back later and wonder if there had been anything she could have done to change it. Three bullets. The first hit Sam in the chest, fired in panic as Sam lunged for the man with the gun. His mouth contorted into an ellipse of pain. Foamy blood spilled down his chin as he took aim, squeezing the trigger with trembling fingers; the second bullet made violent contact with the man's sternum. The third burst the throat, a fine spray of blood blossoming outwards. His spine arced with strange grace as he crumpled to the ground. A cloud of black birds spilled from the trees, out across the sky, and suddenly there was Alexei, scrambling for the dead man's gun, threatening in a low, measured voice, to empty it into the second man's brain if he did not vacate the premises immediately.

"Where the hell were you?" she asked, looking up at Alexei stupidly, uncomprehendingly. His eyes were bright and vibrant and unmistakeably, inimitably alive.

"Get Sam," he said, and threw her the keys to the dead man's car. "We have to go."

The stink of blood is thick in the humidity, a sour tang like old rust.

Alexei rifles through Sam's backpack. There is a little money, and a brown glass bottle with a couple of round white tablets at the bottom, untouched. There are clothes, which Alexei arranges on the bed, and several pencil sketches of a thing so monstrous Rina can scarcely bring herself to call it a rabbit at all. The ears are sickles, scratched into the paper with such violence that the imprint is visible on the other side. The eyes are empty white holes, unblinking and malicious. She gives the drawings to Alexei, wanting to be rid of them; she can feel the rabbit's malignant glare even through the paper.

"Is that really what they look like?" Rina asks.

Alexei glances cursorily at the drawings. He folds them back up, tucks them into the blankets with great care.

"I don't know," Alexei says.

She looks up, sharply, and in that moment, watching Alexei fold Sam's dirty clothes with the love and reverence of a parent, she thinks she understands.

She remembers the hot blood coursing over her hands as she pulled Sam into the car, the way he had stared up at her with naked reproach. *You took the rabbits away.* She remembers Alexei, standing in mute, powerless horror as the last traces of Sam's grip on reality finally spent themselves under the midday sun.

Rina stands at the door and waits for Alexei to finish arranging Sam's possessions around the bed, orderly and perfect, fragments of who he was and who he will never again be.

They walk out into the stifling heat of late morning. Alexei holds out his hand for the car keys. For a long moment, she stares at them, cool against her damp palm.

"Are you coming?" Alexei asks.

She imagines herself in the Chrysler's front seat, alone, driving away through the mountains, away from Arizona and the smell of dead men. Towards the town she'd run from, the home she hoped she would never see again.

As she passes him the keys she realises her fingernails are still rimmed with black blood, a trace of Sam she cannot seem to get rid of. It's too late to say no, too late to escape, because this is all there is now. This is the sum of her life, an inventory of items she had never hoped to accumulate: two dead bodies, a stolen car and a trail of red rabbits that might never have been there at all.

"You're all I have," she says, and knows he understands.

She and Alexei, heading down the rabbit hole, together.

LETTERS FROM ELODIE

I went home with Sean the night Elodie died. I remember glancing in her direction as we turned to leave; she was dancing barefoot in the incoming tide, and the pebbles were bright with moonlight, her legs glistening. The beautiful Swedish boys were singing and clapping a rhythm and she danced for them. Her smile was luminous. I'd never liked men but I went home with Sean anyway, because I was angry, and because I was lonely, and because he'd slept with Elodie a few times before and by my bitter, drunken logic it was the closest I would ever come to being with her.

I remember the way she moved, loose-limbed, keeping time not to the rhythm of their clapping but to the beat in her head; Elodie had always been out of sync with the rest of the world. There was laughter on her lips as they sang to her, bliss in her half-closed eyes. The Swedish boys were tall, white-gold, like angels. She caught my eye as I turned to leave, paused a moment—arms held high above her head as though in rapturous sky worship—and her mouth formed two silent words: *Bye, Ruth.*

The next morning, I woke alone, and she was dead.

I met Elodie on New Year's Eve, at the house party of an artist friend whose opulent basement flat looked out onto Palmeira Square. Elodie sat alone in the courtyard garden as the clock struck midnight, chain-smoking rollups. She had blunt-bobbed hair, like a silent movie star; she wore a dove-grey silk dress, her legs bare, face pink with cold. I

thought she was ridiculous. I thought she was beautiful. I brought her a flute of champagne and offered her my coat and she smiled. We shared rollups stained scarlet with the imprint of her lipstick and when morning came—red sun rising sluggish over the rooftops—I walked her home just to be with her for a little longer. We walked slowly along the seafront, her shoes dangling from her fingers, the sharp salt air scouring my smoke-heavy lungs clean. She knew all the homeless people by name, and wished them all a happy New Year. "I've been homeless more than once," she told me, though she'd known me only a few hours. She used to say that if no one person could claim to know her better than the rest of the world, then nobody could ever own her.

She always was full of shit.

Her flat was a top-floor conversion on a shabby street near Hove station, the kind of place artists and loners lived; the kind of place people died alone, surrounded by empty vodka bottles and the black-scorched bowls of misused spoons. She didn't ask me in for coffee, and I didn't ask for her number. I thought I'd never see her again. I hoped that I would.

The next time I saw her she was a face in the crowd, dancing to the beat of a local indie band while I worked the bar. The band were regulars, and their fan base was small and loyal. I was sure I'd never seen her there before, but she knew all the words, whooped for joy when they announced her favourite song. She was breathless when she came to me at last, black hair plastered to her face with sweat. She smiled, greeted me with warmth, and even though her voice was half-swallowed by the din my name had never sounded sweeter in anyone else's mouth.

She was one of the stragglers who stayed behind as the band packed up. It seemed that everyone knew her, that I had been stumbling around Brighton all these years oblivious to her influence. She sipped black rum through a straw and told me about herself. She was so bright, so effervescent that I felt shabby in comparison,

embarrassed by the mundanity of my life. She frequently broke off mid-conversation to introduce me to her friends. Everyone was Elodie's friend. She invited people into her life with such ease and yet, for those few hours, bathed in the spotlight of her attention, it seemed that I was the most important person in her world.

Elodie talked about herself like her entire life was a story in the midst of unfolding, and it ought to have sounded terribly pretentious but she was magnetic: she'd hitchhiked solo across Australia, lived on a boat in Amsterdam with a trio of sex workers who barely spoke English. She'd taken acid on a beach in Greece and seen the face of God in the water. She delivered this last anecdote with such sincerity that the incredulous laughter never made it past my lips. Her dark cat-eyes were trained intently on mine as though she could share her experience telepathically. As though she could show me God.

"What did She look like?" I asked, half-joking.

She smelled like cigarettes and sweat and rum. Her lips were silk against my ear.

"Everything," she whispered.

They found Elodie's body washed up on the beach. The Swedish boys had been the last people to see her alive. They'd parted ways with her at two in the morning. She'd seemed happy, they said. They had alibis, all of them. The only thing they'd done wrong was to leave her on her own, but stupidity wasn't a criminal offence. They could have saved her. They would carry that mistake with them for the rest of their lives.

Her pockets had been full of stones, the police said. She'd walked out into the water, under the pier, where nobody would see her in the dark. There had been no drugs in her blood, no alcohol. No signs of a struggle. The pieces came together: Elodie had walked into the sea, and Elodie had drowned.

I didn't believe any of it.

Her parents must have come to collect her body, though there was no word of a funeral. Elodie spoke about her parents sometimes,

but they seemed distant, and faintly sketched, as though they were purely hypothetical. She'd said they'd disapproved of her decision to stay in Brighton, where—they had opined—*we* would drag her down. *We,* the 'druggies and dropouts and perverts', who gathered on the beach six nights after her death to celebrate her short, vibrant life, who shed tears at the cruelty of it all; *we,* her legion of friends and acquaintances and ex-lovers, who built a bonfire and told stories of her: how special she had been, how rare and bright a jewel. It was bullshit. A grotesque pantomime in which Elodie, even in death, was the star. It was exactly what she would have wanted.

"It doesn't feel like she's gone," Sean said, as we hunched side by side next to the dying fire and shared a cigarette. I trusted Sean as I trusted few other men; he and I operated under the unspoken agreement that what happened between us on the night of Elodie's death was a one-off, and I knew his sudden appearance was not by virtue of scouting for exploitable weakness. "Sometimes I wonder if she was ever really there. You know? Like she was a dream we all had. She never felt *real.*"

I turned to Sean. He hadn't shaved since Elodie's death. His eyes were cow-large and sad. I chewed the inside of my cheek until the taste of iron flooded across my tongue.

"She was, though," I said. Of all the lies I might have told, it was a lesser transgression. I could sense by the loosening of his shoulders that he was grateful for it. He lit another cigarette, and lifted it to his lips, and said nothing more.

I walked away from the fire, away from everyone else, bitter-mouthed and nauseous with stories of her. I stared out at the sea that had stolen her from me, and I pictured her: water spilling from between bruise-dark lips, eyes wide and sightless; skin blue-marbled, hair wet and glossy against her face like black blood. Exquisite dead girl, balletic on her mortuary slab. My beautiful narcissist. I'd known her more intimately than any of her lovers. I knew that she would never have chosen to die so quietly, so secretly, her pockets full of stones. I wondered why she'd put them there. Why she'd walked out into the water that night and let herself drown.

She rejected me gently, the way I imagine she'd rejected countless others. She explained that I met every single one of her criteria. I was as perfect a partner as she might hope for except for one very significant thing.

"I'm not gay," she said, apologetic, as though what I kept between my legs was the sole obstacle to a great and profound love affair. I did not know what her criteria were. In all the time I loved her, I could never pare down her extensive list of partners to a common set of characteristics except that not one of them had ever been a woman.

I burned with shame. I should have read her better. She was unselfconscious; she held herself with the easy confidence of one who has never learned to be ashamed, who has never had to repress and hide away. She was dressed as David Bowie that night. Another party, another performance. Bare skin beneath her jumpsuit. A beautiful boy under black light, a handsome girl in the glow of the streetlamps. And in the dark, a black-eyed angel; a perfect creature for whom binary notions of sex seemed quaint and inadequate. Strange, that someone so straight should wear queer so well.

"But I hope we can still be friends," she added, and the smile in her eyes was so sweet; the promise in there of some nebulous closeness that I knew in my heart would amount to Elodie's emotional table scraps, but I was so hungry, so desperate. She kissed me on the cheek, wound an arm around my shoulders. "You're very special to me, Ruth," she murmured, though we had barely known one another six months. Her warm, soft body felt like heaven. I greedily drank up her affection and despised myself for every last drop.

I walked along the beach towards the bright lights and noisy chaos of the Palace Pier, where life had not stopped for Elodie. Against the gathering dark the pier shone gold, a gaudy ersatz sun. She'd always hated that pier, though she herself had only lived in Brighton for a

few years, scarcely enough time to consider herself rooted. She hated the noise of it, the quaint seaside tackiness: bingo halls and funfairs and sticks of rock, a monument to an era which, she contended, ought to have died out with the new millennium. She used to say that Brighton was for artists and outcasts, and it didn't seem to matter to her that she was neither of those things because she was so good at pretending to be; so good that even when she was dead, people talked about the "free spirit" she had been, as though there'd been any truth in it at all.

She played the part well. She would commit to no one, to nothing. Plan would supersede hazy, unrealised plan as though they had only ever been suggestions: *I'll move to New Zealand. I'll learn sign language. I'll open up my own bar.* She flitted between jobs, subsisted off borrowed money, which she solemnly promised she would pay back someday. It was an adventure, she used to say, to never know, to be at the mercy of the future. Nobody else could make meandering through near-poverty sound quite so romantic.

Cold water engulfed my shoes, a sudden shock. I'd wandered off towards the incoming tide. Above me, the pier consumed the sky. The sea lapped at my ankles. Alone in that empty, liminal space, waves hissing like blood in my ears, I heard a voice calling out from the darkness.

She'd leave me voicemails. She knew I had an aversion to talking on the phone, even to her. She knew I would switch my phone to "silent" overnight because I valued my sleep far more than I valued human interaction. Elodie was a forest fire, burning through men, consuming hearts and leaving them in ashes, but it was never about love, or sex. She was Narcissus, and she beheld her own reflection in the eyes of her lovers.

I called them her 'letters,' as though it were an intimate correspondence, something we had both consented to. I told her I threw them away, 'unread.' She smiled at the metaphor, at my

compliance, and we never spoke of it again. She knew I was lying, but that was okay. I was so good at keeping her secrets.

More often than not, she'd be drunk when she called. The persona she had so carefully put together would lie tattered, her crisp accent slurred; all the things she hated, all the people who had disappointed her. All the lies she had told. With each letter I pieced her together until she was no longer a patchwork of wild stories and daydreams and wispy, far-off ambitions but something else entirely. Something sadder, smaller. Threadbare at the edges and bitter at the core. Still vibrant; she could be no other way.

I'd lie alone in the dark at 3 am listening to her messages over and over, revelling in her vulnerability. I'd run her entrails gently through my fingers, press my tongue against her raw, exposed skin. I'd savour the anger and loneliness in her voice, feel a warm thrill in my heart at every barely suppressed sob. She disgusted me. I adored her. She would not love me, but she gave herself to me all the same. I held the truth of her in the palm of my hand. At any moment I might have exposed her, shown all her acolytes what they were really worshipping. She gave me the means to destroy her and trusted that I would never do it. That's all love is, when you strip it down to the bare bones. A loaded gun to the temple with someone else's finger on the trigger.

The salt stung my nostrils, the rich smell of wet decay. Thick moss grew where the struts met the water, damp and glossy. The space beneath the pier stretched out before me like a long, lightless corridor, framed on either side by deepening dusk. She was out there, beneath the water. I heard her whispering in the dark, though she couldn't have been; her lungs had been reservoirs, her mouth filled with sand. And yet it was her voice, her cadence. I'd listened to her messages enough times that I remembered entire monologues by heart, could quote her the way other people quoted beloved films.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and laid it on the shingle. Peeled off my shoes and placed them beside it. The pebbles were cold,

wet with brine. She'd filled her pockets with stones. Walked out into the water. She'd died alone. She'd died without telling me.

The sea swallowed my ankles, tugging at the hems of my jeans. I walked into the incoming tide, and though the sharp chill gnawed at my skin, my bones, I felt the rhythm of her words like a pulse. Like sonar, rising to meet me as I turned to face the empty beach, sinking back into the sea. Cold water rushed to embrace me. I let it take my weight, cradling my skull, gentle as a lover. Filling my mouth and ears so that I might taste her, so that I might hear her. Her words carried on the current as clear and as eerie as whale song. Her voice in the water. Elodie's last letter.

Eight days before she died Elodie and I went to a club, because a band she loved was playing, and because she didn't want to go alone. I stood at the bar and watched her dance, though I hated the music: lo-fi indie bullshit, guitars scrawling out derivative riffs, narcoleptic vocals. I watched her pick her victim. He was tall and pretty, like they always were: long blond hair, a sick-skinny boy in tight jeans and pristine white T-shirt. She smiled like a sunrise. She leaned up and whispered in his ear, pressing her body *just so* against his so that there could be no ambiguity, but her coy smile was a play to his ego. She liked to let them believe they were in control.

I downed vodka tonics until the dancers began to blend into one another, an amorphous mass of arms and blissed-out faces moving ceaselessly. I drank until I couldn't see Elodie anymore and so it didn't matter when she disappeared, inevitably, her prize in tow. Always his place; nobody was allowed inside her flat, not even in the name of conquest. I drank until I could barely string a thought together so I wouldn't picture them, so that the images (skin against skin, limbs sinuous, his eyes pale and glassy and her face, there, in the black of his pupils) would be lost in a sea of drunken non sequiturs. So that they couldn't hurt me.

When the lights came up, I staggered out into the cold blue dawn, and the streets were full of us: the dishevelled and the desolate, grey-

faced, haunting the seafront. Avoiding one another's empty gazes as we navigated the slow crash of the comedown.

(I saw her flat for the first time a few days after she died. I asked the landlord for the spare keys. I stood in the doorway holding an empty suitcase, watching dust motes dance in the sunlight. There was a mattress on the floor, a holdall with clothes in. Nothing else. No signs of a life. As though she had only ever been visiting.)

There was a message from her when I woke up. The sun was high and bright, like a pickaxe to the skull. I crawled to the bathroom, pressed my face against the cool tiles. I lay there until the rotten-tooth throb of my head began to subside. I felt empty. Her voice echoed in the small space, omnipresent.

"I suppose I could keep doing this forever," she said, her voice quiet, and I knew he must be there, somewhere, just out of earshot; asleep, perhaps, blissfully unaware that she would be gone before he woke, and that he would never have her again. "What's that poem, you know… the one where she eats men like air? It's so easy, Ruth. They make it so easy. The world will never run dry of gullible men."

The slow drip of the toilet cistern, like water torture. *Press "2" to repeat. Press "3" to delete.*

"I suppose I could keep doing this forever," she said.

Press "2" to repeat.

"It kills them when they realise they can't have me," she said. "Only it's not really me they want. That's the thing. They want the idea of me, the one they've built in their heads. I give them so little to work with, and when they fill in the blanks the Elodie they come up with never looks like me. It's only you, Ruth. You're the only one who knows me at all."

Press "2" to repeat.

"It's only you, Ruth."

Slack face pressed against cold tiles. Mouthing her words like an incantation.

Press "2" to repeat.

"It's only you."

"It just felt right," she said. "It felt like it was time. Like a voice, somewhere inside. Calling me back. I had a good run this time, I think."

I drew air into disembodied lungs, breathing on blind faith. I was numb meat. I might not have existed at all but for the dull fire of my fingertips, my toes, cold-bitten and burning as I kicked feebly against the current, struggling to stay afloat.

Her voice cut through the cold blood-rush of the water, an arrow to the brain: "It tires you out, always having to pretend. And of all the places I've been, of all the people I've met, you were the only one who ever got it right. You were the only one who thought to look inside."

Hands light on my shoulders. Skin so cold the breath caught in my lungs. Above me, moonlight seared through the gaps in the pier, stark as bleached ribs. I'd looked inside of her and seen nothing at all but bones couched in black rot; her magpie soul, pieced together out of the fragments she stole from other people, other lives, a ransom note assembled from newsprint. I could have destroyed her, if I'd wanted to. I could have ruined her. I could have.

"Remember when I told you I'd seen the face of God?"

Arms around me, firm. A lover's embrace. Drifting together out into that dark, quiet space, away from the shore. Numb feet free-floating in the cold, black water. Gently, she lifted my head.

"Nobody believed me but you. Nobody knows me like you do, Ruth. Nobody loves me like you do."

I remembered Sean on the beach, staring fretfully at the blood-red embers. *She never felt real,* he'd said, and he'd been right. Elodie wasn't real. She was better than real. She was an act nobody could follow. How could you love a flesh-and-blood human after being exposed to such a perfect cipher?

Her teeth against my skin, anaesthetised with cold as she tore away the flesh, swallowed without chewing. Her tongue was so warm, lapping catlike at my blood. I had dreamed of this, of her tongue and her mouth and her hands, fingers sliding between my teeth. I bit down, tasted the bitter salt of her the way she had tasted me.

Perhaps, when she returned—decades later, somewhere far from here, wearing someone else's face, someone else's name—there would still be something of me inside of her. A fragment lodged deep in that black, empty cavity; woven into the tapestry of her salvage-yard self, a series of anecdotes here, a personality quirk there. Perhaps she might even remember me.

"It's only you, Ruth." Skin shearing as her mouth opened wide, hot and cavernous, the wet tear of muscle fibre, of flesh; like birth in reverse, the silk of her pulsing throat hot against my skull. The exquisite agony of teeth splintering bone. Down into the black water, where she was lithe and strong, legs tight around my ribcage, squeezing out the last tightly held breath. Silvery bubbles rose, broke on the surface. Her lips eclipsed me.

It's only you.

Her mouth, like a black hole. Like the end of everything.

THE GREY MEN

The grey men emerged from the fog on a November afternoon. Three days of thick, pale mist preceded their arrival; three days in which it appeared that the sky had collapsed beneath its own weight, choking the streets with cloud. The world itself was overcast. The fog held firm from Hertfordshire all the way into London, and for the two long, empty hours of his daily commute Adam would stare out of the train window, trying to pinpoint the exact margin where the dew-wet sidings disappeared irretrievably into the white.

When the grey men came they were dark shapes, hanging still in the sky, formless at first but taking gradual shape: the curve of shoulders, the twin protuberances of dangling legs. Heads lowered, the mere suggestion of a cranial arc. As their silhouettes burned slowly through the mist, Adam thought that a few looked to be wearing hats, brims off-kilter, distorting their symmetry. They came one by one, and by the time evening fell the sky over town was filled with them, hanging like fruit from an unseen tree. The entire town was out in the street that evening, faces turned up in unison, speaking in hushed tones, as if the grey men might be listening. As if words might travel further in the strange quiet of the fog. When the news cameras came, converging upon the town from all over the country, not a single person knew what to say to them.

"It's some kind of illusion, isn't it?" Lisa kept glancing out of the kitchen window as she dished up dinner, spooning shepherd's pie onto the worktop in her distraction. The evening was moonless, stars obscured, but if you looked hard enough you could still see the outlines of them, perfectly still despite the autumn wind. "Or that

magician off the telly. He does things like this, doesn't he? There must be wires. Did you see wires?"

"I don't know," Adam said. He pulled down the blind, guiding Lisa away from the window, hands gentle against her shoulders. "They're a long way up. It's hard to tell."

"It's got to be a magic trick," Lisa said, in the kind of firm, authoritative tone which suggested she did not really believe it. "It's daft, isn't it? The lengths they go to nowadays just to get a bit of attention." She pushed shepherd's pie around with her fork, drawing furrows with the tines. Her jaw was tight, eyes cast resolutely down at her plate.

His dinner tasted of nothing. He'd expected it to; it had been that way for several weeks. Like someone had cauterized his taste buds. He'd enjoyed Lisa's cooking, once, perhaps a little too much, judging by the gentle swell of his gut. He'd enjoyed cricket and Motown and building model aeroplanes, though these things seemed lost now, hidden in the fog. It had seeped in through his ears, crept down his throat. His skull seemed filled with it, a wet and heavy presence, and it felt to Adam as if he wasn't really here, sitting at the kitchen table, but lost in the fog, groping blindly for the way out. He'd been wandering in there a long time. Before the mist outside. Before the grey men.

"You look tired again," Lisa said.

Adam smiled. His mouth felt too tight. "It's been manic at work lately," he said. He ate the last of his dinner, chewing it slowly. Like a mouthful of wet sponge. Lisa watched him without speaking, occasionally turning to stare at the blind. He knew she was wondering if they were still there, hanging silently in the night sky.

He watched Lisa draw all the curtains on the way up to bed, shutting off all the lights, as if they might cease to exist if she could no longer see them. In the pitch black of their bedroom, she huddled close against him. He lay perfectly still, sensing the slackening of her muscles as she finally gave in to fitful sleep, and though he recognised the smell of her shampoo and the warm curve of her spine pressed against his side—his wife of eleven years, her skin familiar to him as his own—it seemed that it could have been anyone in the world there beside him, breathing lightly in the dark.

The grey men were still there the next morning. The fog had thinned a little, but a dull haze still lay across the sky like an old net curtain. Adam got up early, leaving Lisa sleeping in the grey dark. In his slippers and dressing gown he descended the stairs, unlatched the door and stood in the porch, arms wrapped around himself. They were clearer now, but eluded definition still; the vague, bleeding edges of wet watercolour. Adam squinted into the gloom but their faces remained stubbornly hidden.

The elderly Irish man who lived opposite stood in his front garden, holding the base of a ladder while his son clambered up onto the roof, shielding his eyes from the pinkish glare of the rising sun. Even at the apex of the roof, he seemed a long way away from the grey men. The old man saw Adam watching and called across, reedy voice carrying a long way in the silence. "Paul swears blind it's an advertising stunt," he said. "He's checking for logos. Strangest bloody thing I've ever seen. What do you reckon it's all about?"

Adam said something vague about magicians and wires and slipped back inside, closing the door quietly behind him. Upstairs, Lisa slept on. He padded into the kitchen and made himself a cup of tea, piling spoonfuls of sugar into a small mound at the base of the mug.

The question had unnerved him. He hadn't thought about what the grey men might mean, and it occurred to him that perhaps he ought to have. He'd merely accepted their presence in the same mildly bemused way he'd accepted that food now tasted like dust, and that the things which had once excited him were now as vibrant as old, faded newsprint.

He should have been afraid, or elated, or burning with curiosity. He should have felt irritable scepticism, or a bolus of hysteria lodged in his throat. He remembered lying in bed at twelve years old, catching sight of an unfamiliar shadow moving against the far wall. He remembered the adrenaline, sour in the back of his throat, and the clench of his stomach like a fist bunched tight in the tangle of his guts. That was how he ought to have felt, he thought, sipping his tea.

There were men without faces suspended in the sky all across town, and the best Adam could muster was puzzled indifference. In some distant part of his mind, it was almost as if he'd been expecting them.

Adam drained the dregs of his tea, crunching warm sugar between his teeth. A hint of sweetness prickled at the base of his tongue. He wondered what Lisa had felt, staring up at the grey men for the first time. He wondered why she looked at him the same way she looked at them.

The TV cameras still lined the streets on the way to work. Adam recognised several of the reporters from the previous night, weary-eyed and caffeinated. A cold wind had kicked up, stirring bare branches; a gentle susurration, a series of whispers passed back and forth across the sky. An ITN news van was parked outside the train station; a woman with a microphone was interviewing a man dressed in a vest and shorts. He held a can of White Lightning just out of shot. Adam caught a brief snippet of conversation—something about the End of Days, and God's wrath writ upon the sky—and then they were moving on, seeking out new opinions to feed the speculation machine. If it was all some kind of publicity stunt, he thought, feeding his ticket through the barrier, then whoever dreamed it up had done a bloody marvellous job.

Some of his fellow commuters were reluctant to sit by the window, opting to stand instead, faces buried in their phones with deliberate concentration. Adam watched the grey men disappear into the fog as the train hurtled towards London. After half an hour, it was as though they'd never been there at all, and the entire train seemed to breathe a collective sigh of relief, as if they'd all finally awoken from some terrible shared nightmare. They probably thought the grey men would be gone by the time they returned home; it'd be all over the internet, this clever new breed of viral advertising, and with their purpose served the grey men would be taken back down. Perhaps the mist might dissipate too. Sheepish glances passed around the carriage: *how ridiculous we are, how gullible. It's just a stunt, and we fell for it. Silly us!*

But beneath it all, Adam sensed a cold, swirling undercurrent of real dread. He wanted to capture that feeling, to put it in a jar and hold it close to his chest. To feel the panicked flutter of a hundred frightened hearts and pretend it was his own.

They were all talking about it at work. His colleagues were mostly Londoners, or dotted around the commuter belt; the strange happenings in a small Hertfordshire town were something of a novelty to them. They'd seen it on the news and spoke with the easy confidence of those who thought they could smell a hoax from a mile off. They said it was smoke and mirrors, that they were hiding the wires in the fog. Some claimed to have seen similar tricks on YouTube, performed by an American illusionist. Adam did not attempt to dissuade them.

"You're from up that way, right, Adam?" asked Ashley, turning in his swivel-chair to face Adam. His gangly limbs looked long and awkward in his too-small suit, all bare wrists and exposed sock. "You must have seen them close up. What're they really like?"

"Looks the same as on the news," Adam said. He tried to focus on the spreadsheet in front of him. The numbers might have been hieroglyphs for all the sense they made, and the cells seemed to wax and wane the longer he stared at them. He looked away. "They're a long way up. You can't see much. The fog's too thick to send helicopters up. Nobody really knows what they look like up close."

"Phil says they're projections. That's why you don't see any wires. Whatever it is, it's fucking creepy," said Ashley. There was a genuine dread in the stooped, defensive way he held himself. Eyes cast low, avoiding the windows. He plucked compulsively at his cufflinks. Adam knew Ashley had been raised Catholic, though he was still young enough to believe he'd shed all of the strange superstitions and rituals of his childhood. Perhaps the grey men had awoken some previously dormant part of him, sparked the fire of the profound religious terror he thought he'd buried so many years ago. Adam almost envied him.

"Anyway," Ashley said, "we're going down to Wetherspoons for lunch. Fancy it?"

"Nah, it's alright." Adam gestured to the screen, waving his hand at the spreadsheet. "I need to finish this by tomorrow and I'm really behind. You guys go ahead."

He heard the clatter of shoes against tile as his colleagues emptied the office, a pub-lunch exodus. He closed his eyes, let out a shuddering breath. Numbers floated in the space behind his eyelids.

He was suddenly aware of Ashley's presence beside him, quiet and uncertain. "You've not seemed yourself these last couple of weeks," Ashley said, wary, as if he might be crossing some hitherto undefined social boundary. "Are you okay?"

Adam opened his eyes, affecting a grateful smile. It felt alien on his face. "I'm fine mate," he said, and hated how blatant the lie tasted. "It's been a bit stressful lately. Deadlines and that. You know how it is."

"Yeah," Ashley said, a little doubtfully. "Well, listen, sometimes it helps to talk about this stuff. Gets it all out in the open, you know? I'm sure your missus would listen, if you asked her to. Women are good with that sort of stuff." Implicit in his words, the unspoken caveat: *please, don't talk to me about it.*

Adam knew Lisa would move bricks and mortar with her bare hands if she thought it would make him happy. "I'm sure she would too," he said, and knew he would not say a word.

He left the office twenty minutes early, telling no-one. The train was quieter on the way home, but as it ate up the distance there was still the strange sensation that the entire carriage was holding its breath. As dusk rapidly swallowed the eastern horizon it seemed that perhaps the grey men might not appear at all; if not through absence (and he could almost feel the crushing pressure of a hundred whispered prayers to that effect) then through camouflage, their forms indistinguishable from the encroaching night. But they were there, and from this distance they seemed a tight cluster, a becalmed murmuration emerging from the darkening mist.

The news cameras had relocated closer to the centre of town, and they were no longer alone. Outside the church a small group of parishioners huddled together, holding candles and singing, low and unsteady: 'Abide With Me', a song he recognised from his father's funeral. The flames flickered in the fog, bright and watchful as cat's eyes. He walked past them, head lowered, but their gaze was cast high and he realised, passing by unnoticed, that this was not some opportunistic attempt at conversion but an excruciatingly intimate display of absolute faith in the face of terror. God was testing them, and they would not be found wanting.

He was close to his destination when he felt a sharp tug at his sleeve. He spun round, surprised; a small middle-aged woman, eyes large and dark and beseeching. "Have you seen their faces?" she asked. In her hands there was a worn photograph of a young man. A boy, really, no older than twenty-one. He had his mother's eyes. "My son disappeared in September," she said. "Gone, without a trace. They wouldn't search for him. Said he'd probably come home of his own accord, but he never did." Her eyes shone with tears, and Adam wanted to look away but she was there, shoving the picture at him with surprising violence. "Tell me you've seen their faces," she said, voice edged with the first shrill notes of hysteria. *Perhaps it's contagious,* Adam thought, staring dully at the photograph. *Perhaps I'll start screaming and I won't be able to stop.* "What if he's stuck up there and doesn't know how to get down? What if he's lost in all that fog? I just need to see…"

Adam didn't know what to say. He left her there, alone in the street, clutching her tattered photograph and walked on. When the keening started, low and anguished, like the cry of a wounded animal, he did not look back. *I know what it's like to be lost,* he thought, the sound of her loud in his ears. *To be lost in the fog with no way out. I know how that feels. It feels like being dead must feel. It feels like nothing.*

The pub was unusually empty, but it was warm, and the television was tuned to the comforting banality of the sports news. Adam sat alone

in the corner with a pint, idly drawing patterns with his fingertip in a trail of spilt beer-foam. Ashley had been wrong; talking to Lisa was not an option. She would want to fix him and he didn't know how to explain to her that he didn't think he could be fixed. She would see him as a piece of shattered china, or smashed bone, and she would spend the rest of her life searching for all the tiny, scattered pieces with which to patch him back up. She would crumble too, eventually, under the strain of it all. She deserved better.

He thought about calling his brother. He lived half an hour away and had always liked this town, this pub, with its real ale on tap and lack of 'wanky bar snacks,' as James put it, claiming a fatal allergy to houmous. He could stay with Adam, sleep off the inevitable hangover and take the train back home in the morning. James would not try to fix him. James would just drink his beer and listen quietly, nod in the right places and order another round when they'd drained their pints.

Adam bought two more beers. One for himself and one for James, placed across the table. He sat alone in the corner, staring at his brother's name on the screen of his phone, and thought about what he might say. For the first time since the funeral, he allowed himself to think of his dad. Sharp-faced and dark eyed, like Adam; a rigid, serious man who maintained, even as he lay dying in a hospital bed, that he was absolutely fine. "I've got both arms and both legs and enough money for a pint of milk. I've got sod all to complain about." Even as the cancer turned his insides black with necrosis, the sweet carrion stink of his breath unbearable. Even as his lungs filled slowly with fluid and his throat collapsed in on itself, denying him even the small pleasure of food, he would say (in a liquid whisper, the voice of a drowning man) "Could always be worse."

James had joked that they ought to have it inscribed on his headstone.

He'd drunk both beers and had started on a fourth by the time he worked up the courage to call his brother. The world had taken on a pleasant blur, smooth at the edges.

The phone rang. His tongue was thick and heavy, stuck to the roof of his mouth. His eyelids drooped. He was not a habitual drinker; alcohol warmed his insides, made him dozy. The phone rang and rang.

He lubricated his mouth with beer, aware the distant pressure of four pints of liquid draining into his bladder. Something uncoiled deep in the pit of his stomach, and he thought it might be apprehension but the corresponding emotion seemed to be entirely absent.

Abruptly, the phone stopped ringing.

Adam stared at the blank screen for a time. Then he slipped it back into his coat pocket, rising from his seat—unsteady, fumbling his way around the table with numb gracelessness—and walked out into the cold.

He walked for a long time, out into the surrounding fields until the lights of the town were only a yellowish glow in the depths of the fog. He walked until the noise of the train tracks and the roads had faded away and he was standing alone in a darkened field, his trousers damp to the knees with dew. Until it seemed that the world had shrunk to the size of a marble, and that within this perfect sphere of misted glass there existed only Adam, the grey men, and silence.

He shouldn't have been able to see them in the dark but they were gathered overhead, a cluster of birds frozen in time. They seemed so close that Adam thought he could graze the soles of their shoes with his fingertips. And he felt them now, a tight band of pressure overhead like a gathering storm, growing ever more intense as he walked on until finally he had to stop, clutching his muzzy head in both hands. Perhaps he was too close; perhaps they were trying to repel him. But that would require some degree of sentience, or a hive-mind, and even in his inebriated state that seemed a ludicrous concept.

"Can you see me?" he asked. He didn't know if he was addressing one of them, or all of them, or dead, empty air. How stupid he must look: a drunkard in a field shouting at strange shapes in the sky, too cowardly to tell a real, living person about the white noise in his head. He turned to head back but the fog had coagulated into a thick wall, the world beyond it utterly lost. He turned a dizzy circle, realising, dimly, that the sour taste rising in the back of his throat was panic.

His mouth fell open, but all that emerged was a thick plume of mist, spilling out into the night.

He realised then that he'd been wrong about everything. About the fog. It had seeped *out* of him, quiet and insidious until the entire town was cloaked in it, and it had just kept coming, oozing interminably from whatever small place in his brain had birthed it. He clutched his hands to his mouth, his nostrils, but the mist leaked through his fingers in thick tendrils and he didn't know how to put it all back inside of him.

Adam turned his face up, staring into the halo of sky above him. "Did I do this?" he demanded. They did not reply. He hadn't thought they would. "Are you here because of me?"

A thousand blank faces turned in silent unison to look at him, baleful in their emptiness. And then their mouths opened, collapsing inwards like black holes; a great rift in the smooth, terrible void of their faces. A scream, long and low, a thousand voices crying out in unison. It was the bright crackle of static, the sound of a radio tuned between stations, and in it was fear and sadness and anger, everything Adam had forgotten how to feel, but remembered now in terrible detail. The force of it drove Adam to his knees, fingers laced tight over the top of his skull to keep his brain from bursting out. Hot tears streamed down his cheeks as he pressed his face to the ground. It seemed he would never be able to make it stop. That the pressure of their anguish would break him into brittle little pieces, grind his bones to dust.

If Lisa was troubled by the sight of her husband stumbling blindly in after midnight, clothes sodden with dew and wet earth, eyes pepper-spray raw, she did not show it. He stripped down and crawled into bed, hiding from the dark beneath blankets that did nothing to ease the chill inside his bones. He felt her eyes on him, assessing him, asking silent questions but she said nothing, and as just before fell into a deep, dreamless sleep he thought he felt her hand creep into his, small and light as a ghost.

Dull dawn light filtered through the gaps in the curtains. The house was quiet in that expectant, pre-morning way, awaiting the shrill song of Lisa's alarm and the bustle of routine. Adam slipped out of bed, feet soft against the floorboards. He took one last look at his sleeping wife, taking in the wild gold tangle of her hair, the slight parting of her lips. The warm, familiar scent of her: jasmine hand cream and washing powder and the faint salt tang of unwashed skin. He did not kiss her goodbye, afraid that the fog might seep in through her open mouth, take root somewhere deep beneath the flesh. He left her no note. She would never understand, but perhaps someday she might forgive him.

He dressed in the dark, buttoning his shirt with trembling fingers, looping his tie around in a perfect Windsor knot. His work shoes were still crusted with mud from the night before, but they would do.

Outside, the streets were awash with a thick, milky silt. He moved instinctively, slipping through the mist. The bright headlights of a passing car sliced through the gloom, slow and smooth. Adam felt as if he were walking on the bottom of the ocean, observing the serene and silent passage of a submersible.

He could still hear, echoing in his ears, that terrible, desperate scream, still felt it reverberating in his chest like a second heartbeat.

By the time he reached the field the sun had finally crept above the horizon, peering through cloud like a single blind eye. He was breathless, clammy with sweat. His shoes were coated with clay-thick mud. And they were there, their empty faces still turned down toward him. Mouths closed, now. Waiting for his return.

"I'm sorry about last night," he told them, shucking off his shoes and jacket. "But I'm ready now. I've been ready the whole time, I think."

There seemed a faint ripple, as if some soundless consensus had been reached, and he knew, somehow, what he had to do. Adam opened his mouth wide and took a deep, steady breath. His lungs opened like a flower. The mist coiled and warped as he drew it back in, filling his mouth, his nose. He breathed it all in, and the entire world seemed to fall away, collapsing beneath his feet like the most fragile

of illusions. He swallowed the fog and felt it chill the very bones of him, permeating the marrow, stripping the colour from his skin. And when he was done he looked around, at the grey men before and beside and behind him, and in their blank faces and still forms he thought he saw himself replicated a thousand times over. Hundreds of feet below, his mud-encrusted shoes and discarded jacket were only a smudge. Nothing else remained to show he'd ever been there at all.

The last thing Adam saw before his face turned blank was a bright disc of sun, set like a jewel into the perfect blue of the sky. He wished he could show Lisa how beautiful it was, all the way up here.

PTICHKA

The night Marta finds out she's pregnant, she cries.

In the yellowish light of an old desk lamp, Marta rifles through an NHS pamphlet: *"Information for migrants giving birth in the UK,"* as if they're a different species. She adds up the cost of the many and varied tests recommended by the antenatal clinic: *urinalysis, nuchal scan, rhesus factor,* strange words in a strange alphabet. She scribbles it all down on a notepad, coming up with a figure that far exceeds her wage. For Marta, free medical care seems like a distant dream, a long-ago rumour, though it's barely been two years since the British government voted to exclude people like her.

She stares down at the pregnancy test in her hands, as if sheer force of will can spirit the money into being. And then she cries. She cries so hard, and for so long that the Sri Lankan woman in the downstairs flat starts banging on the ceiling, calling up the stairs for her to *please, shut up,* or she'll call their landlord. When her baby starts crying, a barrage of florid, bilingual curses echo in the corridor, drifting in beneath her front door, and Marta has never felt so alone in all her life.

At five a.m, Marta goes to work. She sits alone at the back of the bus, trying to ignore the fermented piss stink leftover from the late-night crowd. It's still dark outside, and she dozes, face pressed up against the cold window. She dreams fitfully of the sweet English boy who disappeared into thin air; who, for one night, held her close, told her

she was beautiful. Left her pregnant and scared in a country she's trying very hard to think of as home.

Marta has a minimum wage job and a roof over her head. She might have had those things in Russia too, but she still believes she can have a better future here, if she works hard enough. She spends nine hours serving up chicken nuggets and chips to uninterested customers and their unbearable offspring. This isn't forever, she tells herself. Better times will come.

She stops by an internet cafe on the way home, partly for the warmth. On a forum for ex-pats she reads about clinics: illegal setups offering check-ups for uninsured migrants, undercutting NHS prices. The doctors are questionably qualified, or long retired, but in the absence of a British passport or a lottery win, she's out of better options.

There are other places—places that *end* pregnancies—but she's not sure she wants that. Not yet.

Marta scribbles the phone number down on a scrap of paper, hides it in her inside pocket. She deletes her search history before she leaves. It's impossible to know who's watching, and it's better to be paranoid than stupid. People like her have been arrested for much less.

The obstetric clinic is tucked away above a launderette in Mile End. It's someone's flat, she realises, as she comes in through the door. A scattering of post lies unopened on the doormat, bearing the grubby shoeprints of a day's worth of patients.

An unsmiling woman instructs her to wait, so she takes a seat in the narrow hallway, feet tucked beneath her chair, feeling like a nervous child outside the headmaster's office.

At the foot of the stairs, an old birdcage hangs from a hook nailed into the wall. Inside, a cockatiel huddles on its perch, plumage ragged, watching Marta with baleful black eyes. The perches are crusted white with old shit; the stink of it makes her faintly nauseous.

She knows the fluttering in her abdomen is just nerves, but it frightens her all the same.

"Miss…Berezhnaya?"

Marta looks up. The unsmiling woman stands at the clinic door, clipboard in hand. They're alone in the hallway, and the mangling of her surname seems redundant, but the illusion of propriety must be important to her. She leads Marta into the clinic, which overlooks the street; she can see the blurred motion of cars through the gaps in the dusty Venetian blinds. There's a worn-out examination couch pushed up against the wall, and a table stacked high with plastic storage boxes filled with drugs. Marta wonders how long ago they expired.

The doctor is an elderly English man, hair stained nicotine yellow. He has her sit on the couch while the unsmiling woman—evidently a nurse of some kind—wraps a blood pressure cuff around her arm. "You speak English?" she demands. The space beneath her eyes is bruise-blue and hollow, like she hasn't slept in days.

The machine thrums as the cuff contracts, squeezing her arm tight. "Yes," Marta says, grimacing. The nurse grunts an acknowledgement, glancing at the reading on the screen, noting it down on her clipboard. She asks an array of questions: last menstrual period, family history of diabetes, any unusual bleeding. Marta answers politely and concisely, and although her curdled-milk expression never changes, the nurse seems somewhat pacified.

"We get so many Polish girls in here," the nurse says. "They get themselves knocked up by British men. Got wives already, dirty bastards. They come in snivelling because they thought they'd get a passport. Don't speak a lick of English either."

"I'm not Polish," Marta says.

"Not much difference," the nurse says, without malice.

The examination is the kind of mundane, tick-box experience Marta had expected. The doctor coats her bare abdomen in clear gel. The ultrasound machine is as old and worn as the doctor himself, and although it looks barely functional, the screen is clear enough: A white blur, abstract and meaningless, forms the centre of the picture. It seems impossible to Marta that this bright smudge is a baby.

The doctor frowns, adjusts the angle of the wand, pushing it so hard into Marta's belly that she wants to smack the wand right out of his hands. Outside, the cockatiel kicks into a chorus of squawking. The nurse storms over to the door and slams it shut.

Finally, gravely, the doctor looks up and says, "there's something wrong with the foetus."

The doctor suspects anencephaly. He prints her off a page from the internet, and all she's able to glean is that her baby—that formless white smudge on a grubby screen—is somehow developing wrong. There's an anatomical diagram printed blurrily at the foot of the page. The baby's face ceases entirely just above the eyes; there is no skull, no cavity in which a brain might sit. No light in the eyes. Poor little frog-child, she thinks, running her finger across the diagram, smearing wet ink.

The doctor tells her that a baby so profoundly deformed would almost certainly be stillborn. She stares numbly at the long-outdated posters tacked to the clinic walls, the stacks of home-printed leaflets. It is out of her hands, now. "Do what you think is best," she says.

On the tube home, Marta rubs at the sore spot where he'd injected her. "Expect cramps and heavy bleeding," he'd told her, wiping away a bead of blood welling from the wound like a tiny red eye. "If you don't stop bleeding in a couple of days, or the pain becomes unbearable, go to A&E."

Which surely had to be a joke, Marta thinks; he must know the law, must understand her situation, or he wouldn't be running a place like this. If she can't afford proper prenatal care, how can she possibly afford A&E?

There's a sharp, sudden twinge in her stomach.

In the clinic, she'd counted out the notes carefully, pressing a wad of grubby twenties into the doctor's nicotine-stained palm. He'd refused payment for the injection. "Think of it as a favour," he said. "Go home. Get it over with. You were unlucky this time. Next time will be better."

Marta grits her teeth against the cramps, ignoring the questioning gaze of the woman sitting opposite. Marta's mother once told her that she'd been born under unlucky stars. Mama, she thinks, pressing a rueful hand to her stomach. Why couldn't you have held on 'til morning?

The blood never comes.

The cramps subside before midnight, and she sleeps that night with a bath towel spread out beneath her, anticipating a terrible mess. But when she wakes, there is no blood, not even a drop. Her stomach aches a little, but even that is gone by the time she gets to work. She crams a clutch of maxi-pads into her handbag just in case.

Three days pass, and still no blood, no cramps; she digs the paper-scrap from her coat pocket and calls the clinic, but it goes through to voicemail. She goes to work, because there's nothing else she can do, ambling blindly through another shift. It's late by the time she gets home, and the Sri Lankan woman—Ayesha, Marta has signed for her post more than once—is leaning out of the living room window, smoking a cigarette. Her child is propped up on the sill and stares placidly at Marta. Marta says good evening, and is rewarded with a curt nod.

Upstairs, the flat is freezing. She switches on the space heater and peels off her uniform, leaving it puddled on the floor. She makes to crawl into bed but stops, catching sight of herself reflected in the window.

Her belly has grown. She turns slowly, marvelling at the way her skin is stretched drum-tight. She has been dazed, lately, paying little attention to her body except for the increasingly distant promise of blood. She stares at her reflection, at her too-long limbs and fine, dark hair. Her swollen stomach is awkward on her thin frame. She reaches a hand out to the window, tracing her belly in the faint condensation.

There's a sudden thump, and the rattle of loose glass as something hits the window hard. The impact reverberates up her arm. She yelps, leaping back from the window. Her feet tangle in the mess of clothes; she yanks the shirt from around her ankles, heart thudding hard in her chest, and peers up at the window.

The sky is thick with black cloud, swallowing the moon entirely. Imprinted against the outside of the window, almost obscured by condensation, is the pale ghost of outstretched feathers; a chalk-outline smear detailing the impact of a bird against the glass.

Marta pulls on her trousers and coat and scurries downstairs. Ayesha's front window is closed now, curtains drawn, the remains of a cigarette smouldering on the sill outside. She tiptoes barefoot around to the back of the house, down an alley filled with two weeks' worth of uncollected black bags—even in this cold weather, the stink is eyewatering—and there, lying still beneath Ayesha's kitchen window, is the bird. Its neck lists at an unnatural angle, but its eyes are open still, gazing up at her with what she imagines to be reproach.

Back home, it is said that when a bird hits the window, a death is on the way.

She ducks low, breathing white into the dark, and scoops the bird up in both hands. Its heart beats against her palms, frantic at first, growing ever slower as she sits, shivering, running a gentle thumb down its dark, glossy plumage. *Skvorets.* She doesn't know the English name.

Behind her, the kitchen window creaks open.

"It's dead," Ayesha says, appraising the broken little thing in Marta's hands. Her mouth is curled into a familiar frown. Ayesha never smiles. "Throw it over the fence, let the foxes have it."

"It's still alive," Marta says. "I can feel its heart beating."

Ayesha shrugs. There's a flare of bright light as she strikes a match, lights another cigarette. "It'll be dead soon," she says. A grey plume billows out from between her parted lips. Marta doesn't know how she can afford to smoke as much as she does.

They sit like that for a time. Ayesha silently smoking, Marta cradling the dying bird, her bare toes slowly turning numb. For ten minutes, the bird perseveres. Why? Marta wonders. Its neck is broken; doesn't it understand how hopeless it is?

Eventually, Ayesha's baby starts crying, and she departs without a word, pulling the window shut behind her. The child's insistent wail continues, muted now behind glass.

Abruptly, the bird's heart stops.

Marta gets to her feet and lays the bird beneath the bushes at the back of the garden. Maybe the foxes will find it, she thinks. Or maybe it'll lie there, too frozen to rot, preserved and perfect until spring comes.

She looks out of the window the next morning. The bird is a small black shape just visible beneath the frost-rimed leaves. Not even the foxes have touched it.

Marta steps out of the shower, glancing at her changing form in the steam-clouded mirror. The stretch marks are vivid in the light, blue lines like veins, marking her sudden growth. She swears she's grown bigger since last night.

She places her palm, gentle, just above the concavity of her navel, tapping her index finger twice against the tight round gourd of her belly. For a long moment, nothing happens, and she feels terribly stupid, embarrassed at her whimsy. Was she truly expecting her child—poor deformed thing, hanging on in spite of the doctor's intervention—to tap back? To understand her intentions, her maternal Morse-code: *tap twice if you're still alive.*

And then there's a ripple of motion inside her, like the stirring of damp, new-born wings, and she smiles, amazed at his persistence, at his struggle to stay alive. She whispers a promise in the language of her mother: *Keep fighting, little one. I will keep you safe.*

Over two months her belly grows, far quicker than it should; she lies when people ask her how far along she is. She is twenty-two weeks pregnant, but looks almost ready to burst, abdomen ripe and round with fluid. She goes to work, because she can't afford not to, and maternity leave is a luxury she won't be afforded. She wears her old uniform until the buttons gape wide, and her boss grudgingly gives her a new one on the promise that she'll pay for it later.

Nobody asks where the father is.

Every day, Marta performs the same ritual: two taps above her navel, protruding now like a tiny thumb. And every day he answers, growing ever stronger; she feels him high in her gut, tight and coiled, shifting occasionally when his position no longer suits him. Some

nights she lies in her bed, distended belly gently pulsing, and wonders if the doctor got it wrong.

Marta goes into labour on a Sunday afternoon. She's standing in the canned goods aisle in Morrisons when the first contractions come; a raw, tearing sensation, like something newly awoken inside of her, trying with tooth and claw to force its way out.

She has nothing meaningful to compare the pain to; she's never given birth, never so much as broken a bone, but she knows, as she doubles over, that this is not normal. The woman beside her pauses to stare, briefly, before returning to the infinitely more important business of comparing the calorie content of the tinned beans. Marta bites back a gasp. She drops her basket and stumbles down the aisle, wiping her streaming eyes with the back of her hand.

A warm wetness runs down the inside of her thighs. She knows it's blood. She can smell it, coppery and obscene. And everyone is staring at her now, watching the madwoman stumble past the checkouts, out into the cold street. Somehow, she finds her way home. By the time she gets there her vision is swimming at the edges, hands trembling as she tries to slot the key into the lock. After a few fumbling attempts Ayesha comes to the door; her face is as indecipherable as always, but Marta thinks she looks mildly irritated.

"The baby," Marta says, indicating the bulge of her belly, the dark, reddish stain on her jeans. "It's too early."

"Go to the hospital, then," Ayesha says. Pain splits Marta through her middle; she grabs Ayesha's wrist, fingers tight. Ayesha's skin is cold and dry, rough like tree bark.

"I haven't got enough money," Marta says, through gritted teeth.

And Ayesha nods. She understands. Marta has spent long nights kept awake by the rasping, wheezing coughs of Ayesha's child in the grip of bronchitis, and Ayesha's feet thumping against the floorboards, pacing endlessly up and down. There is no NHS for people like them, not any more. There is salvation only for those who can afford to pay for it.

Ayesha guides her inside, where it's only marginally warmer. The communal hallway smells of dust and old, damp carpet. She all but drags Marta up the stairs, fumbles in Marta's pocket for the front-door key. "Avanthi is sleeping," she says, when Marta glances questioningly at Ayesha's door. "She'll be okay for a while."

They stumble into the bedsit, the pair of them, like drunks after a long night out.

"Where's the other one?" Ayesha asks, looking around. "That Colombian girl?"

"Deported," Marta answers. She crawls onto the bed and curls up tight. "In November. Only me now."

Ayesha leaves Marta writhing on the bed while she hunts through the cupboards, the bathroom, picking through Marta's meagre supplies for anything useful. When she returns, she's got an armful of old towels, a full kettle, a plastic washing-up bowl.

"I've done this before," Ayesha says, laying the towels beneath Marta. She's no less terse, but she is the only familiar face Marta knows. As she bleeds steadily, breathes hard, Ayesha's face grows hazy at the edges, a smeared watercolour, the puffy margins of her cheeks indistinct in the bright afternoon light.

Marta doesn't feel Ayesha pull her jeans off (though she does hear the sharp intake of breath, sees the bright gleam of panic in Ayesha's eyes, and she wonders just how much blood there is; her little bedroom smells like a slaughterhouse). Save for the percussion of her chattering teeth she is silent, soaked through with sweat but colder than she's ever been in her life. Her belly seems to pulse visibly, a living thing, pale and ugly. Pain wrenches at her insides. She's being sliced open, torn apart. In her delirium, she imagines her belly is splitting in the middle, skin peeling back; a bloody flower, her baby pink and pristine at the centre.

Marta hears herself crying out. She sounds very far away.

Ayesha places a broad hand on Marta's forehead. "You have a bad fever," she says, shaking her head. Her dark fingers are smeared with bright blood. "You need the hospital."

"I can't pay," Marta mumbles. Her head lolls to the side. She can't lift it. Her muscles are useless, paralysed by the pain. Everything seems

a little too bright, a little too liquid. Like none of it is real. She peers up at the window, at the pale bird-ghost imprinted on the outside, a stark, burning white against the blue sky.

It's still there when she squeezes her eyes shut, floating in the dark space behind her eyes. Marta opens her mouth wide in a silent scream, tasting the salt of her sweat as it runs down her face. Something tears deep inside her, unanchored; she can hear Ayesha telling her to push and she's bursting, coming apart at the seams, raw and burning and dizzy.

And just like that, it's over.

The room is quiet save for her own ragged breathing. The baby should be crying. They always cry in films.

"Let me see him," she says, breathless.

Ayesha's staring down at the bloody towel bundled in her arms. "His head…" she mumbles, appalled.

"My *son,*" Marta insists. Her lips feel numb; the words are lumpen in her mouth. "Give him to me."

Ayesha places the bundle in Marta's outstretched arms. He is so light, but she can scarcely bear his weight; her arms feel insubstantial as she lifts him up, seeking the face beneath the red-stained folds. He is perfect, her son; his black feathers are slick with fluids, eyes hard and unblinking. Beautiful *ptichka*, small enough to fit in the concavity of her cupped palms.

She smiles up at Ayesha, lips pulled tight over her teeth, and says, distantly: "He has his father's eyes."

The other woman's eyes are wide with horror, bright with tears. "It's dead," she says. "Can't you see?"

Marta shifts her son to the crook of her elbow, places two fingers on the bony arch of his chest and taps, gently, hollow bird-bones reverberating. And there's his pulse, slow beneath her fingers like the ripple of tiny wings.

"No," Marta whispers. "He's still alive. I can feel his heart beating."

WHEN CHARLIE SLEEPS

Propped against the bathroom door, clutching an old guitar, Hanna sings Charlie another lullaby.

Go to sleep, Charlie.

He's awake in there, still. The black beetles that come from under the bathroom door are his messengers. They walk ponderous circuits, antennae trembling, moving jerkily like windup toys.

Sleep, Charlie, sleep.

The guitar is held together by duct-tape and willpower. It belongs to Mercy, who can coax delicate music from the four remaining strings. Hanna strums nonsense-chords and sings old pop songs, though she is not much good at either of these things. Charlie doesn't seem to mind.

The flickering of the lights is slow now, the blinking of a single sleepy eye. It's a good sign. An agitated Charlie is quite a thing to behold; every light in the squat flashes wildly, though the power was cut years ago. Stella says Charlie creates his own energy. As she sits in the hall, breathing white in the dark, Hanna wishes he'd channel a little of it into the central heating.

Even more than that, she wishes he'd *go to fucking sleep.*

So Hanna sings. And when the song finishes, after what feels like hours, Hanna holds her breath, and her heart sinks when she hears Charlie's insectile nonsense-chatter emanating from the keyhole. She knows, by now, what this means: *Another.*

She starts anew. The back of her skull beats a steady rhythm against the door and outside, as the sun struggles over the horizon, London stirs.

The previous night—the night Mercy brought her to the squat—Hanna woke with a violent start. She sat up, heart hammering, tongue thick in her dry mouth. She searched in the dark but Steve wasn't there, his space in the bed was cold as bone, and Hanna wanted to scream but then she remembered. She wasn't at home anymore. There was no home, at least not one she could go back to. No doubt there'd be another woman in their bed tonight. Stupid girl, Hanna thought, fingers trailing up her forearms, tracing old bruises in the shape of Steve's fingers. Her swollen nose throbbed in the dark.

She needed the toilet. She got up, wrapping the sleeping bag around her. She wore only the old t-shirt Mercy had lent her, several sizes too large. The bathroom was next door. When Mercy first showed her around, she'd mentioned in passing that the upstairs bathroom was off-limits; something about rotten floorboards, dodgy plumbing. But Hanna was disorientated and rattled and by the time she remembered, the door was already open and the black expanse of the bathroom was revealed. For a moment Hanna thought she'd opened the wrong door, that this was no room but a void, and then something had risen above the rim of the bath, slowly, eyes glowing like embers in the dark.

It wasn't as if Hanna woke Charlie on purpose. She hadn't even known he was *there.* She tells Mercy this over and over until Mercy is sick with it, threatening to lock her in with Charlie and throw away the key. Subdued, Hanna stares at Mercy; how, she wants to ask, could she have let her sleep next door to a monster?

Stella comes down the stairs, finger pressed to her lips. She has accomplished what Hanna could not. It stands to reason; she has had prior experience with Charlie, has spent long, sleepless nights reading him stories and coaxing him to sleep. She and Mercy, working shifts.

Neither of them seems outwardly angry at her, although Hanna thinks they'd have a right to be. She is an accidental guest, after all.

She's here only out of kindness. The squat is theirs. Actually, it's *his.* An Edwardian townhouse in the heart of Lambeth, imposing even in its neglect. The windows are scabbed over with sun-bleached newspaper. The front garden is a snarl of bindweed. The neighbours don't notice them. Nobody knocks at the door. Hanna suspects that this is not a coincidence.

"He's napping. He'll be awake again soon," Mercy says. She's a stout Filipina, an ex-nurse; she'd found Hanna dazed and bleeding in a Southwark underpass, clinging desperately to a tattered rucksack as though her entire life were within it and begging to be taken home to the man who'd relieved her of several teeth. Mercy had brought Hanna back to the squat instead. Just for one night, supposedly.

"You'll have to change his water when he wakes up again," Stella tells Hanna. She doesn't bother to hide how put-out she is by it all. She piles her thick hair beneath a bandana in lieu of washing it, rubs her tired eyes with the back of her hand. "You woke him up. You do your bit."

Nobody shows Hanna what to do, but it seems like common sense. She takes the bucket into the back garden and, hidden by snarls of overgrown foliage, quietly siphons water from the neighbour's hosepipe. Like changing a litter tray, or cleaning a fish tank, except Charlie is no pet. Hanna pushes the back door open with one foot, clutching the full bucket to her chest. Who'd want a pet like Charlie?

It's hot in the bathroom, thick and tropical like the inside of a vivarium. Hanna closes the door behind her with a click. Across the room is a cast-iron bathtub, the enamel stained yellow like old bones. The tiles are furry with black mildew, the windows obscured by newspaper. She breathes deep, easing her nerves, and heaves the bucket onto the counter.

"Hello Charlie," she says.

The tinkle of displaced water indicates his acknowledgement. She sees him as she approaches, a dark smudge beneath the surface. His form is distorted but recognisable. Red eyes stare up at her,

unblinking. She doesn't know if he's holding his breath under there; Charlie, neither man nor frog but something else, something *other.* It wouldn't surprise Hanna if he didn't breathe at all.

Hanna sits on the lip of the bath and Charlie rises with slow grace; his skin is the glossy grey of a wet paving slab. He smells like an underpass, the ammoniac stench of week-old piss and gutter mulch. Clubbed fingers splay towards her, grasping. She leaps to her feet, backing quickly away. He is ugly, and alien, and although she senses nothing but benign curiosity, she keeps her distance.

"I've come to change your water," she says, trying to hide the quiver in her voice. Charlie regards her with what she interprets as disappointment. His features are primitive: dull, Neanderthal jaw, black slit-mouth, heavy brow. Clicks and whirrs emanate from the depths of his pulsating throat. The glut of mucus obstructing the plug-hole comes away with a thick sucking sound. Clots of stinking matter streak the bathtub as the water drains. He stares up at her, awaiting her approach.

Hanna fetches the bucket from the counter. Her sweat-damp hair sticks to the back of her neck.

"Ready?" she asks. If he understands, he doesn't care to answer. As the water spatters against his skin the clogged-sewer stink of him rolls up into the air. Hanna presses her sleeve to her mouth until the water settles, already stained a pale sepia. Charlie chitters in what might be joy. It's so unexpected, such an innocent sound that Hanna almost smiles. Almost forgets he's a monster.

The water is barely enough to cover his feet. She'll have to make several more trips. Charlie reclines in his puddle, heavy skull resting against the slope of the bath. The fleshy rope of his umbilical cord floats in the shallow water. Hanna follows its trajectory. One end joins seamlessly with the concavity of his abdomen, coiling up and around and sinking once again, pallid as a cave fish, into the open black mouth of the plughole. Down into the sewers, the guts of the city off which Charlie feeds.

When she returns, Mercy and Stella sit Hanna down and explain, as well as they can, what Charlie is.

"Stella was the one who named it," Mercy says. "It's been here longer than we have. Possibly even longer than this house has stood here. We think it's taken several forms over its lifetime. It keeps us off the radar here, which gives us a safe place to stay. I suppose we're meant to be his caretakers, but we mostly try to keep him asleep. It's safer when he is."

"What happens when he's awake?" Hanna asks.

Stella indicates the squat with a sweep of her arm. The water has calmed Charlie temporarily, but it's not enough; the lights still flicker like a faulty flashbulb. The taps in the downstairs bathroom gush brown water in sudden bursts. Hanna sits, cross-legged, sleeping bag wrapped around her shoulders. It is imperative, Mercy explains, that they return Charlie to a state of hibernation, because the longer he stays awake the greater his agitation will grow, and the more extreme the manifestations will become.

"There was a time a couple of years ago when we couldn't get him back to sleep for over two weeks," Stella says. "By the time we wore him down, almost the entire borough was in a blackout. A massive sinkhole opened up just off the high street. Nothing but black all the way down. The Imperial War Museum was infested with rats. There was an outbreak of leptospirosis. They shut it down for months."

"Maybe it was a coincidence?" Hanna suggests.

Mercy shoots Stella a wry look and it occurs to Hanna that they must have had this conversation many times over. And the more Hanna thinks about it, the more ridiculous it seems; how can she even try to apply an idea as quaint as coincidence to a sexless monster living in a bathtub in an abandoned London townhouse?

"It's a parasite," Mercy says, like they're discussing someone's problematic cousin. "A malignancy. It feeds off the city. You saw the plughole, right? That's how it communicates with London. It's a two-way thing: if Charlie's unhappy, the city suffers. The worse its temper, the worse things get. It's only when Charlie's asleep that London becomes autonomous again. When he's awake, it's chaos. And that's why Stella and I try to keep him asleep." Implicit in her glance is an

accusation: *you fucked this up. I never should've brought you here.* She's too polite to say it out loud.

"How do you know all this?" Hanna asks.

"She doesn't," Stella says, blunt. "We don't know a bloody thing. What Mercy's telling you, she learned from the people before us. The rest is educated guesswork." She pauses, rifling through a pile of mouldering books to find Charlie a bedtime story. "This goes back longer than you can imagine. We won't be the last of his keepers."

It's nonsense, the stuff of feverish fantasy. And yet, as Hanna looks from Mercy to Stella, at the grim lines of their mouths, a cold sensation creeps into the pit of her stomach and coils there, tight; maybe it is nonsense, but it's happening all the same.

The next day, a swarm of beetles pour from the rotten space inside the walls and take up residence in the dark spaces. Hanna has spent her second night acting parent to their communal monster-child, and she is heavy-limbed with exhaustion. She comes into the living room, sinks into the futon. Already, this is too much. She hadn't wanted to be a part of this. She didn't *choose* to come here. When she tells Stella this the other woman just smiles, a mirthless flash of teeth.

"Nobody *wants* to be here," Stella says. "But someone has to take care of him. Mercy and I have no family, no life to go back to. We might as well do what we can."

"You could kill him," Hanna says.

Stella regards her silently for a while.

"Charlie didn't choose to be the way he is," Stella says. Mercy calls Charlie 'it', but with Stella, it's always 'he'. "I don't know much about him, but I know he was here before London was even a twinkle in man's eye. By accident or design, the city was built around him, and now he's a part of it, and it's part of him. You say we could kill him." She shakes her head. "Charlie's bond with this city is strong. In a sense, Charlie is London. If Mercy's right about him transmitting his moods—if there is some weird psychic bond—what kind of chaos would killing him create?"

"You've thought about it, though," Hanna says.

"Mercy has." A beetle crawls up her thigh, coming to rest in the crook of her knee. She doesn't seem bothered. It's probably not the first time. "We've always managed to calm him down. But yes, she's talked about it more than once, when things get bad."

"And you?"

Stella plucks the beetle from her leg and holds it between her thumb and forefinger. Black eyelash legs skitter frantically in mid-air. She lifts the struggling insect slowly up until it is level with her mouth.

"You have to understand," she says. "When Charlie sleeps, his dreams stay in his head. But he never stops dreaming. And when he's awake, the visions leak out. That's what you see here. All of it. This is what's in Charlie's head."

Hanna's stomach twists into a knot as Stella's lips part, a slow, thoughtful motion, and Hanna desperately tries not to retch, but Stella purses her lips and blows, gently, as if extinguishing a birthday candle. The beetle disintegrates, scattering gently outwards in a shower of black dust.

"He didn't choose to be this way," she says, brushing the dust from her hands. "He doesn't mean any harm. I know you think he's a monster, and you're probably right. But he can't help but be what he is."

Hanna thinks of Steve, of the choices he had made. She thinks of the rage bright in his eyes, the scrape of his knuckles against her cheek. She hadn't been able to change him, or even warn the next girl. She can't change Charlie either, but maybe she can make things better. Maybe she can stop him doing any harm.

She talks to Charlie a little more after that. Not much. Day to day things, the kind she'd usually talk to Steve about. Things she can't tell the others, because they don't seem to want to know anything about her. And although Charlie doesn't seem to understand, she swears he's listening.

It seems fitting to Hanna that when Mercy finally cracks, it's during Stella's shift.

The back door slams; every other door in the squat rattles on its hinges. Hanna is pulled violently from sleep, legs tangled in her sleeping bag. The thunder of boots as someone storms upstairs. It's Steve, she thinks, huddling beneath the blanket. It's Steve and he's angry about something and he's coming up the stairs, towards her. It's only when Stella starts screaming that she remembers where she is.

Hanna rolls over. Someone is in the bathroom, stomping hard on the rotting floorboards. She scrambles to her feet, shedding the sleeping bag as she goes. Stella stands at the bathroom door, blocking the way with arms outstretched. Her book lies forgotten at her feet, her torch a black shape on the periphery. Mercy stands before her, wielding a mud-caked pickaxe in both hands like a spear.

"There've been riots up in London," she says. "It's all over the papers. Buildings burnt to the ground. People cracking each other's heads open. It's fucking *insane* out there. Nobody knows what's sparked it." Her fingers tighten around the pickaxe. "But we know, don't we Stella?"

"You can't *know* that," Stella says, but she's shaking, and before she can react Mercy bulldozes through her, shoving her aside. Stella stumbles out onto the landing. She stares at Hanna for a moment, looking small and powerless.

Hanna dashes into the bathroom. Mercy stands over Charlie, the pickaxe raised. Charlie cries out, high and keening, and Hanna feels a sharp pain somewhere in the vicinity of her heart. She hadn't been convinced he was capable of emotion, but his fear is unmistakeable.

"People are *hurting* one another," Mercy says, indicating Charlie with a sharp jut of her chin. "Don't tell me it's coincidence. Don't you dare insult my intelligence like that. This has gone as far as I'm going to let it."

"Wait," Hanna says, and Mercy turns for a moment; there is doubt in her eyes, and Hanna realises she has a choice. For the first time in a long time, she has a choice. "Calm down. Let's talk about it. That's how you get things done here, isn't it?" She raises both hands, a placating gesture. "You've got him to sleep so many times before.

You can do it again. We'll work together." She swallows hard. "This is my fault, Mercy. Not his. I should never have gone into the bathroom. I'm so sorry."

Mercy looks uncertain, but she steels herself, raises the pickaxe high in both hands like a wooden stake.

"Mercy, *please,*" Hanna says.

The axe-head is clotted with old earth, but it glints in the guttering light, and Hanna barely has time to wonder what Charlie sees when Mercy brings it down hard. The blunt metal pierces Charlie's skull like a knife through paper. Black spills out into the bathwater. Charlie chokes, gurgles. The axe descends again, faster this time, cracking brittle bones, and the stink rising from the bathtub is rich and thick and rotten. Mercy raises her weapon again, but looks up at the bathroom light, dead at last. Her t-shirt is spattered with black. Charlie floats in the dark water.

Hanna looks over her shoulder, away from Charlie's ruined body. His fearful wailing still echoes in her ears. Charlie is dead, and she's too stunned to feel anything. Stella sits against the bathroom door, knees drawn to her chest, staring numbly at her.

"There," Mercy says, wiping sweat from her cheeks. "He's gone. You fucking cowards." The pickaxe clatters to the floor. For a long moment, the only sounds are Mercy's ragged breathing and the slow drip of spilled water over the edge of the bath. "It's over," she says, at last.

"For both our sakes," Stella replies, "I hope you're right."

Stella and Hanna wrap Charlie's body in black bags and haul it into the boot of Stella's old Ford Mondeo. The neighbours peer at them through a gap in the curtain as they leave the squat, narrow-eyed and suspicious. Charlie is gone; the dreamlike ignorance with which the neighbours had previously regarded them is gone too. They are exposed.

Hanna goes with Stella because it feels like the right thing to do. To see that Charlie's death does not go unremarked. Helpless Charlie,

the heart of a city, though he never had a say in the matter. Who asked for nothing but a safe place to dream.

Mercy had called Charlie a malignancy. As they wrestled his sad little body from the bathtub and onto the floor, severing the umbilical cord, Mercy told them she'd saved the city, cut it free from Charlie's greedy, suckling influence. Neither of them had argued. Mercy wouldn't have understood.

Mercy's door was shut when they left the squat. "She got what she wanted," Stella says bitterly, staring out of the window at the passing houses, the skyline still shrouded in early morning mist. Everything is calm. Debris from last night's rioting lies in the gutter, undisturbed. Nothing is burning. Nothing is crumbling. "Give it time", Stella tells her, adamant, although there is doubt in her eyes, and the frown lines around her mouth speak volumes. Whatever Stella had been afraid of should have happened by now. The idea that Mercy might have been right all along must stick in her throat.

They drive to the dump ("Recycling Centre", the sign insists) and hide his body among a sea of broken furniture and wet, yellowing weeds. Hanna looks to Stella, and she shakes her head. There's nothing to be said. Charlie is dead, and the city carries on without him, at least for now. Hanna wonders what they'll make of his body, if anyone ever finds it; if they'll think him a strange, awful sculpture abandoned by its creator. She knows nobody ever will.

They get back into the car. The lush, rotten smell of Charlie still lingers. There is a heaviness in Hanna's chest. Without Charlie's protection, the squat is no longer a safe haven. She will have to move on. Perhaps back to Birmingham, where her mother will undoubtedly greet this new failure with glee. If Stella is right—and Hanna is increasingly uncertain of this—then it's probably best to leave London altogether, before the last of Charlie's influence dissipates and the cracks start to show. *If* they start to show.

They pull up to the squat. The neighbours' curtains are wide open, their windows empty. Perhaps they've given up watching for now. Stella pushes the door open. A scattering of tiny black beetles emerge, pouring out into the sunlight where they disintegrate. Hanna

looks sharply at Stella, who shakes her head. "Remnants of a dream," she says. "I don't know. This is new to me, too."

"Maybe." They haven't spoken much since Charlie was killed. Neither of them quite knows what to make of it. There's a sense that an injustice has been done. Stella still won't accept Charlie's part in the rioting, although the streets are ominously quiet this morning. Still, though, Hanna can't help but blame herself. If only she'd never woken him. If only she'd calmed him in time...

Inside, everything is as they left it. The squat has not yet fallen apart without Charlie's protection. The smell of damp plaster and lemongrass incense still presides. They mill at the bottom of the stairs, uneasy, none of them willing to be the first to ascend into the black hallway above. What lurks there now that Charlie is gone? Finally, Hanna takes the lead, hoping her nerves don't show. Stella brings up the rear. Hanna suspects she might have gone first if she hadn't been trying to make a point. Better the devil you know, even when that devil is a bathtub-dwelling parasite.

Stella strides past Mercy's open door and is about to ascend the stairs to her attic room when there is a sudden pulse of light from the overhead bulb. A momentary flicker, gone almost as soon as it appears. Hanna looks at Stella, waiting for her to comment, but she says nothing. Hanna wonders if she saw anything at all.

She waits for Stella to disappear into the attic and veers sharply towards the bathroom. It takes everything in her power to stop her from running, and yet as she approaches the bathtub in the centre of the room, she's filled with equal parts joy and trepidation; what if there's nothing? Remnants of a dream, Stella said; traces of Charlie lingering like old blood at a crime scene. As she leans over the rim of the bath, she hears her own sharp intake of breath, her wide eyes reflected in the shallow pool at the bottom of the bath.

The bathroom light buzzes.

There he is. Charlie in miniature, a grey bud bursting from the remains of the discarded umbilical cord. They should have destroyed it, but in their haste, they simply severed it and left the remainder to rot. He is tiny, this new Charlie, the size of a child's fist, a glistening grey maquette wallowing in a stagnant puddle still stained with his

predecessor's black blood. His eyes are tiny rubies. She slips her hand into the water, cups the newborn Charlie in her palm. He stares up at her, unblinking, chittering faintly like a faraway insect. Talking to her in whatever primitive language he speaks. Like he's telling her it'll be different this time. And maybe it will.

"I'm sorry about what happened." she says. "But we're going to do it properly this time. No more bad dreams. No more riots. I'll keep you safe." His skin is leathery, and not unpleasant. "Go back to sleep, Charlie."

His eyes slip shut. And as he rests there in the warm concavity of her hand, Hanna swears she sees the black slit of his mouth contort into a smile.

IN THE CITY OF BONES

I was born with fish-skin, my eyelids turned inside-out. I was born with the expectation that I would soon be dead. The nurses anointed my tiny body with balm, wrapped the cracked-earth scales of my skin in thick gauze; they placed me in intensive care and waited for God to realise His mistake. To take pity on His wretched little creation, this raw little beast. Naked flesh like jester's motley, a split and weeping harlequin. My parents thought me a terrible omen. They walked out into the white summer night and never came back.

"Zoya," Matvei says. My name is not and never has been Zoya, but I smile my tight red smile, look up from my desk to where he stands by the door. He always comes in without knocking. "I'm going out of town for a few days. There's enough food to keep you for a week, though I won't be that long. It's important you keep working while I'm gone, yes?"

It's quaint when he calls it 'town,' as though it is the kind of place people live in. "Will Dren still come?"

"Dren will still come." Matvei does not leave often, but when he does, he is gone for days. I do not ask him where he is going. I understand, in theory, that other places exist. The hospital in which I was born. The orphanage in which I spent my early years. Walls filled with people, with noise, with perpetual motion. The doorways and corridors which taught me object permanence, that people continue to exist even when you cannot see them. That the places you leave behind are not quietly swallowed by the world. "There is plenty of firewood next door. Make sure Dren brings some inside for you. It's getting colder."

"I don't mind the cold."

"I mind you freezing to death." He is a stern man, Matvei. Shaggy as a goat and wolf-grey. Face like a mountainside, deep-furrowed and hard; his nose and chin and jaw are sharp-edged crags carved by harsh weather. He is never unkind, but mean with praise; it is a currency he will not freely spend. "An iced-over corpse cannot work. It is useless to me."

Over all the years we have worked together I have gradually learned how to interpret Matvei. What he means is: 'if you were to die, I would be unable to replace you, such is the quality of your work.' I make a mental note to write this down later, to store it away with the other kernels of almost-praise Matvei has gifted me over the years. "The broadcasts are far fewer these days. Is that good or bad, do you think?"

"It just is." He is gazing out of the window now, at the swell of clouds packed tight from horizon to zenith; snow-clouds, perhaps an oncoming blizzard. Winter has been mild so far. The first few squalls of the season have been lighter than expected, the autumn sun persistent, and sometimes Matvei mutters to himself about the world drowning, the cities underwater. I have only ever seen cities in photographs. "The most important thing is that you keep searching."

"What if there aren't any broadcasts?"

"I'll bring ointment," Matvei says. "More food. The tinned fruit is running low. A new blanket, yes? All of these things." He is avoiding my question; his sudden interest in tinned fruit is a poor mask, the blanket a reward for my compliance. They are expensive, the blankets he brings, made from mulberry silk and imported from China. They feel like an extravagance, a luxury I have not earned, but they are soft and cool against my fish-skin, and Matvei has never begrudged me the cost. You must be comfortable, he tells me, as though the raw rims of my eyelids and stiff joints and shiny pink carapace can be magicked away through the power of an expensive blanket. As though we are not isolated here, so far from the world; a town nobody visits, on a road nobody travels, in which there is only Matvei and Dren and me, and the numbers, over and over like a song I cannot forget.

I am probably only alive still because of the numbers.

Thu 1 September 2016 21:05 weather cool/cloud
Freq. 5815 kHz
three rising notes rpt x3
female voice, German: achtung, achtung
32125 32125 99456 99456 69179 69179 54356 54356
ende ende

Sometimes my fingers are so stiff that it's hard to hold the pencil, to manipulate the lead into making the correct shapes. My notes are always diligent, precise. Matvei has taught me to count in several languages, to understand enough so that when I encounter a broadcast in Czech or German or English I can accurately transcribe the numbers. My desk is piled high with notepads, a precarious cityscape of ivory pages, arcane notations, spiralbound and dusty. Times and dates and numbers, over and over. This is why Matvei keeps me fed and housed. This is my life's purpose.

Sometimes Matvei will come and examine my notes with his furrowed goat-brow, patchy beard like lichen. "Good," he will say, and I will note his approval on a scrap of paper—time, date, content, a praise broadcast of sorts—and I will place it in a desk drawer, beneath a pile of old Soviet newspapers. *(The way is open to man!* the headline proclaims, alongside a photograph of two small dogs in jumpsuits.) Someday, when I am dead, someone will open this drawer and find these little scraps of praise, these paper ghosts, like transmissions heard once and never again. And perhaps they will hold them up to the thin light, and read the trembling Cyrillics out loud, and with each voiced syllable the words will blossom once more, like the pale pink blooms of taiga flowers pushing through thin spring snow.

The UAZ pickup is a familiar silhouette lumbering up the winter road, grey-hazy through the falling snow. The road leads to the coast, Dren told me once; it is an old road, and nobody much uses it nowadays. There is nowhere to travel to. "You live like islands out here," Dren said. "Scattered up and down like there's miles of ocean between you and the rest of the world. You could find somewhere better, if you wanted. Somewhere off the road. A new place, better than this mausoleum."

I dream sometimes of a convoy, bright headlights burning in the dark. I dream that people are coming here, that they will fill the empty apartment blocks, open up shops. That I will wake one morning and look out of the kitchen window, and there will be children in the playground, the creak of swings and the bright music of their laughter. I told Matvei about my dream once. His stare was hard, empty, his eyes barren. "People are cruel," he said, and there was regret in his voice. "Your face. Your skin. They would call you a monster. They would tell their children to look away. It's better like this, Ulyana." He changes my name with the phases of the moon, the shifting of the seasons: Zoya, Ulyana, Yeva, Ekaterina. Never once has he called me by my birth name, the one thing the orphanage saw fit to gift me. "Don't you think you deserve peace, after all you've been through?"

Dren lugs firewood from the adjacent apartment, piling it up in the back room. There are few trees this far north. Matvei says we are at the end of the world up here, where the boreal forests grow sparse, and only the most stubborn conifers weave roots into the permafrost. The firewood Dren brings is imported. We cannot rely on the town and its surrounds to provide enough fuel to outlast the long night of winter, though Matvei has combed through the abandoned apartments before in search of things to burn. The acrid stink of a smouldering sofa is a poor second to the warm, clean smell of wood-smoke. "Ash wood," Dren says, as they stoke the fire. Flickering red tongue lapping at dry bark, the slow warmth of the blossoming flames. "Best wood for a steady fire. You can even burn the green wood, if you've no time to dry it. Very useful. Shame it doesn't grow out here." They stare out the window, clucking their tongue in thought. "Shame nothing grows out here."

The tin bath takes time to warm up. I have grown used to the shock of cold well-water, the sharp chill burrowing beneath my plate-armour skin, my gnarled bones. Dren steps outside while I bathe; I watch them smoke through a gap in the curtain, green woollen hat bright against the gloom. I scrub my fish-skin with a coarse washcloth, laboriously scouring off layers of old, dead dermis until I am raw and pink and shiny, divested of my scales; smooth and wet as sealskin. When Dren first came they thought me a house-fire survivor, and the truth of it sounded so alien on their tongue, in their strange accent: *harlequin ichthyosis,* the little fish-girl, the one who survived.

"The bears are sniffing around again," Dren says, briskly smoothing ointment into my sore-stiff shoulders. "I see them out on the road. Far away, but they look very thin. They'd eat you alive if they got the chance." Dren is ruthlessly efficient; Matvei brought them here as a nurse, a therapist, for there are no hospitals out here, and my condition is precarious. I do not know if Dren was ever a nurse in their previous life. I think Dren is beautiful, though I have no frame of reference for human beauty. My recollection of the orphanage grows milky over time; the stern, silent adults all blend into one, a blurred and frowning presence in the fringes of my memory. I was kept away from the other children, though they too were defective, abandoned; they exist in my mind only as ghosts, as pale limbs behind half-closed doors. So Dren is beautiful in the way the aurora is beautiful, or the sun-warm taiga; emerald moss, the bright wink of cotton-sedge soft in the breeze. Narrow-faced and dark, like a fox in summer colours. They are beautiful in the way the world is beautiful.

"It's coming down heavy outside," Dren says, glancing up at the window.

"You could stay here, if it's not safe to drive. Matvei's apartment is empty while he's away, and I know he wouldn't mind…"

I feel Dren's shudder as though it is my own. "No," they say, quietly. Their hands are rough against my shoulders, fingers a little too hard against my skin. I bear the discomfort in silence. "People were never meant to live in this place. I tell Matvei all the time that he should leave here. But he is a stubborn man."

"Why build a town here, then? Why would anyone go to so much trouble?"

The fire pops and crackles. Outside, in that blue polar night, snow drifts like falling ash. "This place," Dren says at last, wiping their hands on a towel. "The road that leads here. That takes me home again. People call it the road of bones. It is built on the bodies of the dead. The people who constructed it. All of them, prisoners. Too much work to give them a proper burial, so they left them where they fell. Do you know why nobody lives here anymore?"

I shrug my jumper back on, wincing as the wool abrades my skin. "I don't know anything," I say, and this is the truth. Matvei tells me only the things I need to know. I can read and write and cook for myself. I can decipher the numbers. Why would I need to know anything else?

"They found gold. Coal, platinum. So many riches here just beneath the surface. They built mines and put prisoners to work. These towns and villages…they filled them with starving men and worked them half to death. Later, when they closed down the gulags, they lured families here. They were promised a new life, a prosperous life. But you cannot cleanse a place like this. It will always be stained. When they closed the mines down, the families all moved away. There is nothing to stay for." Dren fumbles in their coat pocket for cigarettes, a lighter. "These are dead places. They are washed in the blood of those who built them. Doesn't the dark and the silence ever trouble you? Aren't you ever afraid?"

I think about this for a moment. I look out of the window at the playground. At the slide, thick with snow, the empty frames of the swings. The dark, hollow eyes of empty apartment blocks. "No," I say, truthfully. "I have never been afraid. There is nothing here to be afraid of."

Dren looks at me for a long moment, their lips pursed around an unlit cigarette. There is no anger in the sharp set of their jaw, the furrow of their brow. Dren has never pitied me, not even on my worst days—split, bloody skin, the delirium of fever, of pain—but here, now, I read sorrow in their eyes.

"I'll come tomorrow," Dren says. "It's going to be a cold night. Stay inside, yes? The bears are hungry at this time of year."

I know Dren is not afraid of bears. Dren pauses at the door, taking in the faded wallpaper, the furnishings chosen and arranged so carefully by the former residents, who fled west when the mines closed. The life they left behind, which I have so carefully appropriated; I throw nothing away even as I fill this shell with my own small treasures. Their door, which has no lock, for there is nobody to lock out. There are only the wolves, and the weather, and I am safe from them in here. I am safe from everyone here, at the end of the earth; in this bleak and empty place, this city of bones.

I am never lonely on those deep blue polar nights; the darkness is a comforting presence. Winter lasts six months out here. I am accustomed to the sun as a fleeting visitor. It is on the white nights that I feel isolated, remote. Daylight is stark and unforgiving; darkness conceals the crumbling concrete and weed-choked roads, the rust-streaked cadavers of abandoned cars. In the dark, my world is infinite; on those long, bright days there is no hiding how small it truly is, how sad.

When Dren leaves I settle in my leather chair, wrapped in my Chinese silk blanket, and I switch on the shortwave radio. Slowly, I cycle through the list of known frequencies, the places where I know the numbers reside. Sometimes, I hear the same voices, speaking the same words they have always spoken. Only the numbers change. The agitated Englishwoman and her insistent *ready, ready;* the German-accented voice pondering *Papa, November* over and over. These strange preludes greet me like old friends.

Mon 5th September 2016 19:07 weather sun/cool
Freq. 6824 kHz
melody/bird whistling approx. 2min 30sec
male voice, Romanian
doi, unu, noua, unu, unu

sase, sapte, cinci, doi, trei
terminat, terminat, terminat

I diligently note it all down: the language, the words, the numbers. The significance of it is not for me to understand. When I report my findings to Matvei I can read, in the lines of his face, whether these abstract poems which I create have brought satisfaction or unrest. I do not know if he truly understands the meaning of the numbers; if he is able to decode these strange ciphers, or if he is merely reassured by their presence, their regularity. I can sense his deep unease at their recent absence, as though it is an ill omen.

Tonight, again, I have heard nothing. The radio crackles with bright static. I sip black tea from a chipped mug, wading through white noise, intermittent silence. Emptiness, where there should be voices. The radio used to be alive with them; a cacophony of voices and melodies, like birdsong in spring.

Dren once told me they could not understand how I could work so happily, so diligently when I do not understand what my work is for. The truth is, it doesn't really matter to me, the *why*. When Matvei first brought me here I had known only the orphanage: dark rooms with dull walls, the persistent silence of my quarantine. What Matvei has given me is a precious gift. He has given me a home, in which I may move freely, conduct myself as I please. He has taught me to read, to write; he brings me books so that I may understand the world. He has given me a *purpose*. When you grow up monstrous, the one who grants you your humanity is the closest thing there is to God.

"A comfortable cage is still a cage," Dren said, and we did not speak about it again.

When I look up from my fruitless work the fire is beginning to gutter out, and the carriage clock on the windowsill points spindly fingers to midnight. Without the sun as compass, the passage of time is meaningless, and yet I cling without reason to old routines. The radio whispers as I get up to draw the curtains. My knees are rusted hinges, my hands protesting as I extricate the pencil from crooked fingers. I cross over to the window, a bright square of swirling snow. Outside, in the marine-blue dark, something is moving. I press my

face to the glass. There, beyond the playground. Out where the road forks, leading into the town proper; a shadow, moving ponderously through the falling snow, towards the town. There are wolves out here, sometimes. There are bears.

The shadow stops. For a long moment, it is perfectly still. It is too tall to be a wolf, too thin to be a bear, though the snow eddies and spins, obscuring its shape. There are moose out in the taiga, big enough to kill a man. As I watch, the shape seems to pulsate, slow as a hypothermic heartbeat, though this must surely be an illusion. A deep unease blossoms in my gut. As long as I remain indoors, I will be safe. And yet as this strange, pulsing shadow sits there—so still, so close by—it feels as though it has seen me. It feels as though it is watching.

A piercing squeal pulls me sharply away from the window. My heart is alive in my chest, my face flushed with terrified blood. I stumble over to the desk, half-embarrassed at my fright. Of course, it is only the radio, wailing with sudden interference. I scrabble for the pencil as a voice sears through the static, urgent: *okno okno okno.* I transcribe with trembling hands. I wait for numbers, but there are only words, over and over, a language I understand just well enough to translate. *Okno.* Window.

When I am done, I turn back to the window. The shadow has gone. I stare for a long time at the empty horizon, the familiar tableau of swings and slide and climbing frame. At the blank and solemn faces of buildings just visible in the distance. I have never been afraid. There is nothing to be afraid of. I wish Matvei were here.

Tue 22nd November 2016 *00.03 weather cold/snow*
Freq. 3323 kHz
Female voice, Czech:
okno okno okno
zde jasan, zde jasan
konec

The broadcasts always contain numbers. It is the one constant; dissonant languages and discordant melodies, but there are always numbers. And so as I read my transcription over and over, I wonder what it means that the first broadcast I have heard in over a week is comprised only of words.

Window, window, window. This is ash tree. This is ash tree. End.

The sun struggles over the horizon. It is growing weak; soon, it will die, and the night will be absolute, if only for a few weeks. Matvei will surely be home by then. I am not afraid of the dark; it is my constant companion, my dear friend. But there is something out there, and I think it knows where I am, and the numbers are gone.

When Dren arrives, I tell them about the midnight visitor. I deliver the anecdote in as matter-of-fact a manner as I can. I betray no fear or unease and yet Dren frowns, casts their dark eyes out at the playground, where the rust bleeds through the snow. "A bear," they suggest, "half-starved and desperate." But they are beset with doubt, and I know it was no bear. Dren steps outside, tracing the path of the shadow; pausing in that same spot where the shadow had stopped, sat pulsating silently in the dark, and there is barely any distance at all between Dren and I, standing at the window with one hand pressed lightly to the glass. When Dren looks up, shaking their head—nothing, no sign—I understand how clearly the watcher in the snow must have seen me.

Window, window, window.

"There's something else," I say.

I show Dren the transcription. Dren knows about the work I do; they know that Matvei has trained me from young adulthood, that the stacks of notepads contain years of transcriptions, stretching all the way back to the very first weeks after I left the orphanage. I know Dren and Matvei talk, sometimes, out in the street. They share cigarettes, pass a steel flask of vodka back and forth as they discuss whatever they are discussing. Me, probably. They don't care a great deal for one another, but they cooperate, because I am the glue that holds them together. Dren squints at my notes, at my translation; they run a careful forefinger beneath the letters, reading each scrawled Cyrillic at a time.

"Come back to Magadan with me." Dren places the notebook gently back on the desk. "When I leave tonight. We will wait for Matvei there together."

"What does it mean, Dren?"

"I don't know." Dren stares at the mountain of papers and notepads sprouting from the desk like fungus. At the radio, accusatory in its silence. "But if something happens to you out here, and I'm not around to help…" They shake their head. "Come with me. The world won't fall to pieces if you're not here to write the numbers down."

"But this is my home," I say, and Dren fixes their quiet gaze upon me. I know Dren sees me. They are the only person since the orphanage who has touched my skin, who has seen the full extent of my disfigurement, and yet they have never once looked upon me with repulsion. They have never once recoiled at my skin beneath their fingers, even when I am cracked and bloody and peeling in sheets. And so when Dren looks at me, when they speak my birth name in their low voice, I feel naked beneath their gaze; I feel flayed, my ribs spread-eagled, tender and bloody and exposed.

"This isn't a life for you, Anoushka," Dren tells me, gentle. "Someone your age needs to be around people. You need to learn how to be a part of the world."

I think back to the conversations Dren and I have shared. About the ocean, which in my mind is an endless sheet of blue-grey silk, rippling in the wind like washing on the line. About people, and noise, even in the middle of the night. I think about streets filled with people, playgrounds filled with children. But Matvei is right; people are cruel, and I am a monster. They will shudder at the sight of me. They will stare in horror as I pass by, raw-faced, sparse hair and shedding scales; they will whisper, just loud enough so that I can hear them, and my heart quickens at the thought of it, not in excitement but in fear. I cannot go with Dren, any more than I can wish my fish-skin away.

"I won't go." Chest puffed with a defiance I do not feel. I will not show weakness. I will not show that I am afraid; not of people in the street, not of watchers in the snow. Stubbornness has kept me alive

this long. "This is my home, and I have work to do. You can't make me leave, Dren."

Outside, a grey dusk has already begun to fall. The clouds are pregnant with snow. "Keep the curtains drawn," Dren says, reluctant, but I can sense their impatience in the twitch of their limbs, the way they bustle to their feet, as though there is no time to waste in arguing with me. "Stay inside. I will find Matvei and I will bring him back. He will know what it all means. What we have to do. Let nobody in. Not even if they beg and cry."

"Nobody ever comes here." I lick my dry lips. My skin feels tight. I need to bathe, to scrub off my scales. I need ointment, but Dren is up, checking the window latches, the back door; they are zipping up their coat and pulling on their hat. "Is it the radio? Is that why you're so afraid?"

"I don't know." Dren mutters, shoving hands into thick gloves. This is the first time I have ever seen Dren look afraid. "I don't know. Matvei, that bastard. He only ever tells me half of anything, and you? He tells you nothing at all." They sigh. "Those broadcasts. This fucking *road*. Stay safe, Anoushka. Wait for me. I'll be back as soon as I can."

The first flakes of snow drift down as Dren drives away. Within an hour it is falling so thick and so fast that the entire world is swallowed by it; there is no playground, there are no apartments. There are no watchers. No Dren or Matvei. Perhaps there is no me, either. Perhaps there is only snow, and sky, and the bones of dead men beneath the ice.

There are sounds in the night. The wind shrieks in the playground, a mouth filled with white powder. It whips at the cracks in the concrete, clawing at the door, desperate to find its way in. I huddle beside a low fire, wrapped in my blanket. Dren has left me only enough firewood for a day or two, and I do not want to use it all up in case the snow slows their return. I sleep fitfully, upright, alerted here and there by odd sounds, strange timbres. Of course, it is only the weather; haven't I heard all of these sounds before, in the depths of winter? Aren't I

used to the wind's eerie song by now? For all Dren's calm intelligence they are strange and superstitious; they fear the road as though it is something alive, thrumming with malevolent consciousness. But old bones hold no magic, and in all the years I have lived here the road has always been quiet.

The radio hums with quiet static. I wait for the numbers, but they do not come.

I know why Matvei never calls me by my birth name. Why he invents names, changes them with maddening frequency. When he brought me back from the orphanage I was in a bad state; they had not cared for me well, and I was thin and sullen, eyes thick with crust, skin so tight it hurt to breathe. I was a pitiful thing, but they sold me well: I was attentive and obedient, I followed instructions. I was used to isolation. I would never outlive my purpose, for those with my condition seldom survived far into adulthood. In hindsight I was perfect for the job; I would never try to escape, would never dream of leaving, for they had tutored me well in the nature of my monstrosity. On the long drive from Yakutsk he was silent, and I watched the city recede into naked tundra, certain that I had angered him somehow, perhaps simply by existing.

When we arrived at last at the town, I stepped out of the car, stiff-legged and sore, squinting against a sky so blue and so bright it seemed painted on. Sharp, clean air, the smell of frost on the spring breeze. I was too old for the playground, but I was entranced; peeling paint and rusted metal fashioned into strange and wonderful shapes, swings creaking in the wind. A slide clotted with debris and scoured by frost. Matvei must have seen the wonder in my eyes, because he knelt beside me, spoke to me for the very first time: "You can choose which house you want to live in, if you like."

I looked at him, uncertain, this great, shaggy man, this taciturn mountain-goat. Was this a test? Would he punish me for my presumptuousness? But he waited, patient, and after a time I looked out at the town, over at the towering apartment blocks with their

empty windows and moss-choked concrete, so austere. At the playground, magical in its dilapidation. I raised a tentative hand towards the house overlooking the playground, and Matvei nodded.

The house smelled of dust, and of damp; the scattered ashes of a long-cold fire lay in the grate. The furniture was old and shabby even then. Bright-patterned rugs turned dull with dust, rusting utensils strewn across old worktops. Old books with worn spines: *Astronautics Today and Tomorrow.* People had built a life between these walls, filled it with objects and gazed out at the world through wide-open windows. And now it was mine. The enormity of it all was overwhelming. I clutched the book in my hands and burst into tears. And I remember Matvei then, shuffling and awkward, placing a large hand on my shoulder and to my touch-starved senses it felt like a bear hug, like the warmest embrace of my life. "It's all right," he said, quiet. "Things will be better now."

He had never meant to become attached to me. I was never meant to be anything but a useful tool, a receptacle for the numbers: pour them in and I'll spit them out, a machine processing the mundane into omens. Facilitating Matvei's obsession without ever knowing why, for the 'why' has never been my gift. Zoya, Ulyana, Ekaterina, Yeva: all the names I have worn. They are Matvei's armour. They are distance from the daughter I might have become, had things been different. Had I not been destined from the first to die young.

Thu 24th November 2016 *22.47 weather cold/blizzard*
Freq. 6429khz
Male voice, Russian
konets konets konets konets

The sky is collapsing. Daylight struggles to penetrate as the snow falls in sheets. I feed the last of the wood to the dying fire, watch as the flames lick greedily at the dry bark. There is more wood in the

adjacent apartment. I could leave, if I wanted to. I could step outside into the whirling snow, out into the playground where the wind whips fistfuls of sharp ice. Nobody would see me in among all that white. They would never even know. Wouldn't they?

The radio sings its empty song, open-mouthed and vacant. I eat tinned pears, licking syrup from the spoon. Surely Dren and Matvei will be back soon. They will bring me firewood. They will fill the bath with meltwater so I can scour away my thick-stiff skin, wrap me in a brand-new silk blanket all the way from China. They will keep watch for strangers in the snow while I sleep. Surely they cannot be far away now. Surely Dren meant it when they said they were coming back.

Later, when the fire burns low, I take an armful of old notebooks – the oldest ones, from when the numbers came every day – and I lower them gently into the fireplace. As each notebook is engulfed by bright flame I whisper apologies to Matvei, to my past self, so diligent. Like tiny prayers, each one buoyed up on wood-smoke. I am cold and tired and my skin is old, cracked parchment. I am more alone than I have ever been. *Let them come back,* I whisper, as the pages curl and blacken, and I am not sure whether I am praying for Dren and Matvei, or for the numbers. *Let them come back to me.*

Fri 25th November 2016 03:27 weather cold/snow
Freq. 14487khz
Unknown voice, male?
Sobbing, fading in and out. 2.5hrs

I don't think Dren and Matvei are coming back.

A shard of clear black sky gleams through the gap in the curtain. The snow has stopped; the wind is quiet. In the silence left behind

I can hear the crackle of my lungs. The ashes in the fireplace have gone cold, and I breathe white mist into the air as I stand, shivering beneath a mound of blankets. A quiet hum emanates from the radio. It is too steady to be static, a low, sustained note, as though someone far away is singing.

I go to the window. I have huddled behind closed curtains since Dren left, snatching glances here and there, the diminishing hope of headlights through the snow. I have always taken it for granted that Dren and Matvei understand the world in ways I do not. That my childhood seclusion makes me a poor judge of what is real, and true. But the truth is, they fit into the world no better than I do. Matvei, who has lived all his life in the extreme reaches of Siberia, eking out a living, a lonely man driven solely by his obsessions. Dren, who shrugged when I asked if they were a man or a woman; who left war-torn Kosovo so young that they no longer feel as though they have any claim on the country in which they were born. My carers. My captors. My family. Between them, only me. Don't they always say that God loves a trinity?

I pull back the curtains. The snow is a pristine blanket reflecting bright moonlight, illuminating the tired concrete of the old apartments so that they almost look new again. The playground is an undulating topography of gleaming white. I cannot see the road, but I know that the watcher is standing at the intersection; at the place where the road forks, where so many years ago I stepped out of a car and into the world. I can see their shape clearly, now, on this bright night. I can see their narrow shoulders, their long, thin legs, the intense gleam of white eyes burning in the dark. They pulsate in time with the hum emanating from the radio, waxing and waning, this bright-eyed shadow, waiting with infinite patience for me to come to the window.

Let nobody in, Dren had said. *Stay inside.* But the numbers are gone, and I think I finally understand why. They have served their purpose, and so have I. Those voices in the ether, those odd cadences; the music and the words and the numbers, accidentally infiltrating earthly frequencies. The strange tongue of the lost and forgotten, incomprehensible, for it was never meant to reach the ears of the

living. They are calling out to one another across the empty taiga, these scattered bones. They are trying to find their way back to the road. Matvei must have known all this time; he must have been waiting for the day when the broadcasts would stop. When the dead would finally find their way home.

I open the door. A mound of snow spills in; the outside world has breached my inner sanctum. I step out into the snow. My sock-clad toes curl at the sudden cold as I wade out, thigh-deep through packed powder; a sharp chill cuts through my cloak of blankets. The sound of the radio cannot penetrate this far, and yet I hear it still, that low hum. I hear it all around me, everywhere, as though my entire body is receiving it, resonating with it, a conduit for this strange frequency. *Let nobody in.* But they are already in. And as I step out into the playground the hum rises into shimmering static, high and clear as ice, and they begin to arrive, their eyes a constellation of brilliant, blazing stars. They are coming up the road, hundreds of them, all in shadow; an army of the cold and the exhausted, their bones forgotten beneath the ice.

"Come," I tell them. "There is room here for all of you."

The watcher remains still for a moment. Then they begin to move. Slowly, they follow the road leading into town, away from the playground, and the shadows follow; they spill into the apartment blocks, lighting up hollow windows with their pale glow. I hear them whisper in the ether, fragments of voices I have heard so many times before: *sase, sapte, cinci. Papa, November.* Perhaps, when I die—weeks, months, maybe years from now, if I am lucky—I too will talk in riddles and numbers; perhaps my passing will unlock the secrets of their strange language, and I will speak with them—*Okno, okno*—and for the first time, I will understand.

And perhaps, if I wait long enough, I will find Dren and Matvei among their number, buoyed along on this whispering current. Caught in the groundswell in their haste to return to me, swallowed whole by the road. They would not have abandoned me here; they would never have fled west without me. Poor red-skinned fish-girl, whose life was always destined to be lonely and short. I know in my heart that they would never have left me behind.

I greet them as they arrive, this silent convoy. I welcome them with my tight red smile. Their new home, this quiet place, where they might finally find rest. They have travelled so far, for so long, along this road of bones. They have called out across the distance, and I have heard them.

THE LOOKING GLASS GIRL

There's an uncomfortable intimacy in sorting through the possessions of the dead. Running your fingers through their secrets, unearthing parts of them you were never supposed to discover. Things hidden for decades held up under a bright light for all to examine, thick with dust and, sometimes, with shame.

My mother was not a complex person. She loved God, strong coffee and the smell of fresh lavender. She liked crosswords, but could never complete them because she always forgot how to spell words in English. Still, as I sit in her bedroom digging through her wardrobe, unearthing all kinds of strange treasures—silk shoes the colour of wine, price tag still attached, a mink stole wrapped lovingly in pristine tissue paper—I feel a certain apprehension, as though I might accidentally uncover evidence of some secret, insalubrious pastime.

Clearing out the remnants of my mother's life was a task I'd approached with great caution and reverence: here, in these boxes, in these suitcases, is a side to her I seldom, if ever, had been allowed to see. Yellowing photographs of people I've never met, curled at the edges like old leaves; *bonboniere* from weddings I'd been too young to recall. This was her life before England. Before the compulsive piety that consumed her. Before the ghosts became too much to bear.

At the bottom of her wicker sewing basket sits a small Bible, gilt-edged and well thumbed. I lift it out and place it gently on the bed. Beneath that, a scattering of fractured seashells from Trapani powdered with pale sand, their insides pink and pearlescent, and beneath those a small, round object, wrapped carefully in a torn-off strip of yellow linen. It is so carefully parcelled that a pang of guilt

reverberates in my gut as I pick it up, unpeeling triangles of fabric like the petals of a flower.

Something slips out, a snake-quick flash of silver tumbling into the cradle of my crossed legs. I hold it up to the bright afternoon light.

It's a necklace. The silver has tarnished over the years, but the chain is intact. A small pendant sits in the hollow of my palms: a hand, thumb and little finger curved outwards, silver filigree fine and intricate as a spider's web. Stefania's necklace. The one Adel gave her. I remember the glint of it against her sun-dark skin. The way she'd fiddle with it endlessly, but especially when she talked about him: holding the tiny silver hand between her thumb and forefinger as though it were his hand, as though they might never be apart as long as she wore it. My parents hated it.

At the very bottom of the linen parcel is a small, round object. I put the necklace on the bed and turn it over in my hands. A mirror, heavy and old-fashioned, brass frame dulled over the years. It had belonged to Stefania as well; she always made me hold it up for her while she brushed her hair, long and sleek in comparison to the unruly mess atop my own head.

How long had my mother been hiding these objects, these most precious of my sister's possessions? Had my father known? Surely not. His sole concession to mourning Stefania was quietly lighting a candle for her on All Souls, an act never to be commented on. "He's not a cold man," my mother had explained, watching the candlelight flicker before Stefania's photograph, lighting her smile in gold. "This is the only way he knows."

Stefania's mirror, her fingerprints still perfectly preserved, as if she'd only left yesterday. As if she hadn't been missing for the last twenty-five years. I hold it up, seeking my reflection in the finger-grubby glass.

In the perfect oval of the mirror, my sister's face looks back.

My father returned to the house in Sicily shortly after my mother died. My mother had never wanted to go back. Memories, she said,

were like ghosts, and that house was a haunted place. It was the only reason they'd stayed in England for so long.

Ghosts were nonsense, my father said, and went anyway. He took her with him, after a fashion; we held a token funeral in England as my mother's body was transported home, to be laid to rest beneath the blazing Sicilian sun. Cemeteries are a curious thing out there: great stone villages of the dead, towers of sun-baked brick in which tombs are stacked upon one another like drawers in a cabinet; a dissonant mosaic of plaques and artificial flowers bleached pale over the years. Stefania would have been laid to rest there too, if her body had ever been found.

Adel's body washed up in the harbour fifty kilometres up shore in Marsala a few days after Stefania disappeared. He'd drowned, according to the official report, but even as a seven-year-old I hadn't believed a word of it. Adel swam like he'd been born in the water, was as sure-footed as a cat on even the ricketiest boat. All the Tunisian boys were. You'd see them each evening diving off the breakwater, plunging beneath the wine-dark waves; it seemed that they might never come up for air but then they'd emerge, skin glistening like bronze in the red light of sunset, laughing and barely out of breath.

They blamed Adel. All the townsfolk, my parents, the Polizia. They said he'd abducted her; that was what the Tunisians did, the Polizia said; they steal away Italian girls and take them back to Africa as wives. Adel had kidnapped her in the night, forced her out to sea where a storm overcame their little boat, and now her bones lay like pale coral on the seabed, picked clean by fish, never to be found.

I remember Adel's necklace resting in the hollow of Stefania's throat. I remember the sound of his name in her mouth, reverent as a prayer. But Adel was dead, and she was gone, and in the silence left behind the word of the Polizia was all we had.

She looks as I remember her last. Seventeen-years-old, beautiful, happy; her skin burnished summer gold, hair pulled into a braid. She's wearing Adel's necklace. Her eyes are closed, eyelashes like palm

fronds resting against her cheeks. Here is my mother's secret: the last photograph of Stefania, kept safe behind glass and hidden in her sewing box.

I reach for the linen and stop dead as, in the corner of my eye, Stefania's eyes flicker open.

My breath catches suddenly in the cavity of my chest, a terrible pressure. Her stare is intense, her eyes wide and dark and alive. She raises one tentative hand, the pads of her fingers pressed flat against the glass. My pulse beats frantically in my throat as I extend my own hand. Our fingertips meet in untidy symmetry, and though I feel nothing but smooth mirror I imagine, in some small, distant part of my mind, that her skin is warm beneath the glass.

At last, I exhale: one long, trembling breath, my heart a fluttering, insubstantial thing caught in the cage of my ribs. It can't be real. I *know* it can't, but when I pull my hand away, and she hers, and our eyes finally meet, I know it is. Because that bright spark of recognition in her eyes, the sudden upward, lopsided tilt of her mouth as she finally recognises me—older and worn but still me—not even my imagination could paint that smile so perfectly.

Her silent lips form the syllables of my name, slow and clear, and I hear her voice in some forgotten part of my brain, the trill of her tongue rolling an abrupt 'r': *Sara.*

I've never really believed in God, or in His angels and all His saints, though my mother taught me to name almost all of them. I don't believe in miracles: visions of Our Lady, stigmata etched into the flesh of the devout, Padre Pio's kindly smile shining up from a hundred sacred medallions. But I hold my lost sister's face in my hands and I believe, and it takes nothing at all.

"Mama," I murmur. "Did you know?"

Stefania's mouth opens, forming silent words. It takes me a few moments to recognise the phrase her lips shape, strange words in a language I barely remember. A request. A command, perhaps: *tornare a casa.*

Go back home.

The next day I call in sick at work and get on a plane, clutching an overnight bag stuffed with clothes and Stefania's mirror, wrapped carefully in a hand-towel. I board the flight to Palermo not knowing what I'll do when I arrive. I haven't told my father I'm coming. I haven't told anyone. I sit on the plane, trying unsuccessfully to focus on the paperback I bought at the airport, and tell myself this isn't madness until I almost believe it.

I bring the mirror out onto my lap, tugging back the soft folds of the towel until I see her: warm eyes and soft, sad smile. Still there. She looks tired, but that must be my imagination. *It's all your imagination,* a little voice inside me says, but I push it away, refuse to acknowledge it; it's too late now. I'm here. I'm going home. *Tell me why I'm doing this,* I plead silently, but Stefania's mouth remains perfectly still, lips curled almost imperceptibly upwards in an almost-smile.

The young woman sitting beside me peers briefly over, curious; I snatch the towel back up, clutching the bundled mirror to my chest as though it is something immeasurably precious. I feel her gaze linger on me as I stare out of the window at the brilliant azure blanket of the Mediterranean, beneath which Stefania's bones supposedly lie. How can she possibly be down there, cold and alone on the dark seabed when I can *feel* her, warm and small against my sternum like a sleeping child? No, I tell myself, as the jagged outline of the Sardinian coast comes into focus, a fractured spine of rock the warm gold of honey. Stefania does not belong to the sea. She belongs in sunshine. She always has.

Stefania and I spent most of that last summer outdoors. The narrow streets were loud with the insectile hum of *motorinos* buzzing up and down. The girls rode pillion, arms tight around their boyfriend's waists, showing the barest glimpse of suntanned calves beneath long, flowing skirts. We'd walk out to the old pasture behind the house and sit in the shade of the fig trees, swatting mosquitoes and eating lemon granita so cold and so sharp that my teeth would tingle at the mere scent of it.

"I'm going down to the harbour today," Stefania told me one morning as we sat in the sun, her braiding strands of dry grass into the coarse nest of my hair. She'd borrowed mama's makeup: dark, sooty eyelashes and fever-pink cheeks. I thought she looked stupid. "You mustn't tell mama and papa though."

The harbour was a twenty minute walk. We weren't supposed to go there without an adult; I was young, and papa's word was still law, his wrath still a terrifying thing. But the thrill of rebellion was compelling, a coil of excitement in my stomach. "I'm coming too! Can we look for seashells?"

"No, you have to stay here. If anyone comes by, I need you to tell them I'm running errands for papa."

Indignant, I wriggled from her grasp. Strands of woven grass scattered around me. "That's not fair. It's boring sitting here by myself."

Stefania sighed. "It's going to be boring at the harbour too. I'm not going swimming. I want to talk to Adel, that's all. I won't even be gone very long."

I was faintly scandalised. Papa did not like her seeing Adel. When Stefania dared argue he would throw his hands in the air, beseeching God to deliver him from his *testa dura* daughter, who surely knew nothing of love or the world. And Mama would sigh, head held in her hands, longing, no doubt, for a time when things had been simpler.

I liked Adel, though. Whenever he came to see Stefania—always in secret, the two of them skulking through the town in the evenings like cats—he would bring me beautiful things from the beach. Fragments of coral, delicate in his big hands. Rounded nuggets of sea-glass the colour of sky. He'd tell me stories of the sea and I'd listen, enthralled by the smooth-smoky lilt of his accent and the smell of salt about his skin. I think perhaps I was a little in love with Adel too.

"I'll tell," I said, petulant. "I'll tell, and you'll be in trouble."

She crouched before me, her mouth painted the colour of blood, and she took my grubby seven-year-old hands in her own. "Sara," she said, voice pleading. "You can come some other time, I promise. But this time I really need to go on my own. It's very important." Her eyes were grave, solemn, and I knew this was not selfishness but

something real, something beyond my understanding. "Just this once, will you keep this a secret? Will you do that for me?"

I nodded, silent and grudging. Later, sat on the balcony beneath a fat yellow moon, she showed me the ring he'd given her: a slender gold band, studded with a constellation of tiny white stones like faraway stars. It must have cost him the earth. I didn't understand the significance of it then, but I understood the tight squeeze of her arms as she pulled me into a hug, the heat of her skin and the quickstep of her heart, and that told me everything.

Palermo is hot and overcast, the sky curdled with thick cloud. The city itself is sweating. At the airport I hire a car. I try to speak Sicilian but my jaw feels rusted, the language strange and awkward on my tongue, and so I revert hastily to English. I have not spoken Sicilian in almost two decades, and there are huge, gaping holes in my vocabulary. I was born here, I remind myself, staring down at my bare arms. My skin is sallow, bleached pale by the English climate. I feel a surge of shame, as though in forgetting my mother tongue I have thumbed my nose at the island that shaped me.

I sit in the driver's seat, air conditioning cranked up high, and unpack the mirror from my rucksack. Stefania opens her eyes; she looks around, as though confused by the sudden change in surroundings. I lift the mirror to the window so she can see outside.

"We're almost home," I tell her, as I prop the mirror on the dashboard. This time, I'm certain she looks tired; her eyes are underscored with bluish semicircles, her shoulders drooping. I don't know how time passes wherever she is, or what kind of toll this all takes on her. I don't know anything. "What am I supposed to do when I get there?"

She doesn't respond, though her brow furrows as if in concentration. And I realise then that she doesn't understand me. Whether she's reading my lips or somehow hearing me, it doesn't matter. Stefania never learned how to speak English. I run my tongue over dry lips and string together the sentence in my head, a word at a

time. This time, when I ask her—slow, halting—she smiles, waves her index finger slowly back and forth: *be patient.*

I drive with the mirror on the dashboard, affording Stefania a view of the passing scenery. Sometimes, when the road curves toward the coast, a thin grey ribbon of ocean appears on the horizon, barely distinguishable from the dull sky above. I talk to her as I drive, though I'm sure she can't hear me. "I never did settle down," I tell her, smiling wryly. "You always said I was too obstinate for marriage. You knew me better than anyone, even at that age." I tell her about mama's futile longing for grandchildren, her fervent prayer that I would someday have a change of heart. I talk, and somehow it feels right, like this is how it ought to have been all along.

Soon, I find myself surrounded on all sides by undulating hills, thick clutches of *fichi d'india,* empty stone buildings rising out of patchy, yellowing scrub. I am parched and irritable and terribly underwhelmed. I wonder how accurate my memories are, if I've romanticised it all in the intervening years. I recall sitting elbow-to-elbow in the back of my father's dusty white Fiat, windows wound down, sun-baked leather seats hot against my back. And my mother, singing along to Toto Cutugno, her voice high and reedy and strangely melodious, oblivious to Stefania and I sniggering in the back seat. After Stefania, she never sang again.

A fierce wave of grief hits me like a slap in the face, twisting a knot in my gut. My eyes burn, threatening tears. Somehow, I manage to keep going until I reach a roadside Autogrill. I climb out, breathing dust and diesel fumes, and perch against the bonnet of the car, staring meditatively at the stream of passing cars, all driving too quickly. I miss my mother. I miss Stefania. I miss what might have been, the life we could have had but never did.

I wipe tears angrily from my cheeks with the heel of my palm. Opposite the Autogrill is a roadside shrine, a shallow indentation in the rock inside which a statuette of the Madonna stands, surrounded by pillar candles long turned to misshapen stubs. She looks like she's watching me, hands clasped against her bosom in benediction. I look hurriedly away.

I realise then that I'm terrified. There has always been a silly, futile little part of me that believed, against overwhelming odds, that Stefania might still be alive. What does it mean, then, this vision of Stefania, my silent mirror-sister? Her seventeen-year-old self, preserved perfectly behind glass? I'm going mad, I realise. The stress of my mother's swift, sudden decline has tipped me over the edge. The possibility doesn't trouble me as much as it should. I ought to ask someone else to look in the mirror, tell me what they see, but I know I won't. If this is madness, then it is a sweet madness, and I am not ready to lose Stefania forever.

I get back in the car, breathing air thick as syrup. My hands shake as I clasp the steering wheel. I feel a heaviness, as though the gravity here is somehow stronger. As though, now I'm here, I might never be able to leave.

Stefania's eyes are closed again when I pick up the mirror. There is a greyness about her skin, a sick pallor, although that may just be the light. I wrap her back up in the towel and place her on the passenger seat with care. Squinting out into the grey distance, I turn back onto the Autostrada and head for home.

Word travels in a small town. Strange stories emerge from the chrysalis of an ill-kept secret. That summer, a girlfriend of Stefania's let slip about the ring; furtive whisperings among the townsfolk, the illusion of secrecy betrayed by the speed with which the story grew, gaining terrible momentum. Stefania Di Girolamo had gone behind her parents' back and betrothed herself to a Tunisian boy. Such an awful shame! The weight of their pity was tangible.

We didn't talk about the rumours. My parents seemed to think that if we did not acknowledge them—if we swept them under the rug and pretended they did not exist—they would eventually go away.

Papa found the ring tucked between the pages of Stefania's Bible. The next day, it was gone. Stefania did not rage, as I had thought she might, but withdrew into a strange, eerie calm, the flat stillness of the ocean before a storm. She did not say a single word about the ring.

Instead, she started wearing Adel's necklace again, not subtly as before but with defiant pride. We would sit at the dinner table, eating in uneasy silence, and it felt like there was a guillotine suspended above the table, waiting to crash down at the slightest provocation. One night, as we lay in our beds, listening to the dive-bomber whine of mosquitoes, I asked her why papa had taken the ring away.

"He wants to decide everything for me," she said, her voice a fierce whisper. She pressed the pad of her thumb against her necklace, holding it against her chest. "But it's not up to anyone else, Sara. I'll be eighteen soon, and they won't be able to stop me making my own choices. Who cares if we have a *brutta figura?* My happiness should matter more than anyone's reputation."

I was still a child. I didn't really understand. Instead, I placed my hands on the pillow, staring at my thick-knuckled fingers. Tried to imagine what I'd look like with a beautiful ring like Stefania's. Perhaps Adel would bring me one too; a ring brought in by the tide, coral decorated with sea-glass, the kind mermaids might wear, if they existed. I'd hide it somewhere papa could never find it.

I looked over at my sister, at the downward curve of her mouth, her palms flat against her belly.

When I woke the next morning, she was already gone.

The town has barely changed since we left in the late 70's, three months after Adel's body washed ashore. The same tired, dust-coloured facades, cracked at the edges; claustrophobic rows of narrow little houses, a rainbow of washing strung out on a line suspended high above the street. People walk slowly, like windup toys on the brink of expiration. Everything moves slowly here. I park by the municipio, peering up at the cloud-thick sky. I'm certain it's going to rain soon.

I unwrap the mirror and recoil in horror at the sight of Stefania: pale and consumptive, her skin stretched tight across the bones of her face. Her lips are grey and indistinct, fading into the ashy pallor of her face. Her eyes are open but heavy-lidded, and although she is silent I

can almost feel the heavy, laboured effort of her breath. How much time do I have left? I run a finger across the surface of the mirror, and Stefania answers, a trembling hand lifted to meet mine. My index finger sits against the hollow of her palm. She seems so small, now, so fragile. I should have flown out earlier, I tell myself, swallowing down anxious bile. I should have driven faster. Nobody warned me I had a time limit.

I walk hurriedly, head held low, ignoring the curious stares my presence elicits. I don't want to talk to anyone, or answer the inevitable questions—'where did you come from?' 'what's your surname?' Up past the *pasticceria,* glancing up at the closed shutters and recalling the sweet, warm scent of fresh cornetti. Past the church, small and forbidding atop a bank of wide stone steps. By the time I reach the outskirts of town, where my father's house sits in its shabby near-isolation, I am breathless and uncomfortably damp, hair plastered to the back of my neck.

I stand across the road, taking everything in. The thick rust peeling from the balcony, the yellowing net curtains hung like cobwebs in the windows. My father is in there, decaying quietly.

"I'm here," I tell Stefania. I lift the mirror, showing her the house. She seems to regard it with cold indifference, as though the decline of our childhood home means nothing at all to her. Perhaps it doesn't. Perhaps she hasn't the energy to care. "Tell me," I say. "Tell me what you want me to do."

It seems to take a tremendous effort for her to open her mouth. Behind her lips her teeth are crumbling, jutting from bloodless gums like broken masonry. Slowly, agonisingly, she forms the words, and despite her ruined mouth I understand. I know where she is guiding me.

I hold the mirror in both hands as I tiptoe through the alley dividing the house from the row of garages beside it. The ground is a snarl of half-dead weeds and windblown detritus. Beyond the alley the ground slopes gently upwards, giving way to a patchy stretch of grass. The edge of town, rising up unto the hills. The old pasture, fringed by ancient fig trees.

I look at Stefania. Her eye sockets are hollow bruises sunk deep within her paper-thin skull. Her hair is a wispy curtain framing the stark, beautiful bones of her. She gives me a single nod.

The newest fig tree sits ahead of the rest, an affront to the careful symmetry. My parents planted it a few weeks after Stefania disappeared. After Adel's body washed ashore, and hope seemed a quaint, silly thing. Her favourite tree, forever overlooking our home, forever *belonging.* I sink to my knees beneath the tree, smelling the sweetness of overripe fruit, the buzz of insects loud as the blood in my ears. I prop the mirror against the trunk, and Stefania smiles.

And I dig. Carefully at first, dry soil harsh against my fingers, but soon I'm frantically scrabbling in the dirt, knuckles grazed and bloody, scooping up great handfuls of earth. Stefania fades as I dig; the flesh melts from her, grey skin growing tighter until it starts to split, opening great glistening rifts across her forehead, beneath her cheekbones; her lips shrivel, her hair falling away like dust in the wind.

Fat drops of rain hit the ground beside me and I dig faster, deeper, my hands clotted with blood and wet soil, and when I look back up she's barely a person; all withered flesh and smooth white bone. This isn't losing her, I think, climbing into the hole; I'm soaked through with sweat, my muscles strung tight enough to snap, and I have never been so thirsty in all my life. This isn't losing Stefania because I have already lost her. I lost her twenty-five years ago.

My fingers hit something solid. I struggle to dislodge it; my hands are like claws, torn and raw and utterly inflexible, but at last I free it from the soil. Slowly, and with clumsy fingers, I lift it up, holding it out so that the monsoon-heavy rain can wash the dirt away. I already know what it is. Dull ivory shows through; the jagged cusp of a molar, the tight, perfect curve of a chin. It's all I can do not to drop it, this precious thing cupped in the bloody cradle of my hands. "I believed them," I whisper. "All this time. I'm so sorry." It's not enough. It will never be enough.

Here is my mother's secret. Her brutal, awful silence, and my father's shame. *Delitto d'onore,* they used to call it: a crime of honour, but what honour could there possibly be in this? Oh mama, I think, scouring away mud with my thumb. You spent half your life in

church, but no amount of prayer could ever have been enough to absolve you.

I clamber out of the shallow hole, shedding dirt in great clumps. When I look over at the mirror, I see nothing but myself: rain-slick and ruddy cheeked, streaked with dirt and blood so dark it is almost black. I see myself, clutching Stefania's jawbone tightly to my chest, against the percussive thump of my heart. And I wonder if she can see me in there, my mirror-sister, as I stumble to my feet. I wonder if she watches me as I stand, holding on tightly to this last piece of her, grief lost beneath incandescent anger as I start across the pasture towards my father's house.

IN THE MARROW

They went up to the lough after school as they always did. It might be lashing with rain or blowing up a gale but still they'd go, because they'd done it since they were eight and now, with adolescence heavy upon them and secondary school looming, it seemed especially important that they preserve these little rituals. This part of the lough was quiet, unfrequented by hikers and tourists, placid waters reflecting back the crisp March sky in perfect detail.

Tara sat on the dew-wet grass while Hazel methodically checked each of their traps for signs of activity. When they were younger, they'd half-jokingly set them as proof that faeries lived in the woods; smuggling useful objects from home under their jackets and in their schoolbags, rigging tripwires out of twine and alarms out of baked bean cans on string. Later, when faery talk seemed childish, they'd claimed they were protecting the sanctity of their spot. Hazel had suggested they hammer nails into a board and half-bury it in the mud, but Tara had vetoed that idea straight away: what if they forgot where they'd hidden it and stepped on it themselves? How would they explain that to their mam?

It hadn't been her real reason. Intentionally wounding someone for accidentally stumbling upon their sanctuary seemed spiteful. She didn't dare voice that thought. Hazel would've been disappointed, would've told her she was going soft, and Tara was aware already of the slowly widening gulf between them; the shifting sands of puberty and the sudden desire for privacy, to mark themselves out as individuals, each occupying their own space within the universe: not *the twins* or *the Madigan girls* but as Hazel and Tara. And yet in spite of all of this, they still came to the lough.

"Someone's been here."

Tara turned. Hazel was crouched in the undergrowth adjacent to the dirt path. She held up the severed ends of the thread they'd secured across the gap, a thin reel of white cotton stolen from their mam's sewing box. They'd knotted the ends tightly around the tree trunks on either side to form a makeshift tripwire, too flimsy to do any real harm.

"Must've been the faeries," Tara said, quirking an eyebrow. One hand rummaged in her schoolbag for the tangerine she'd saved from lunch. "Quick, get on Facebook. Tell everyone you've proof of the Little People."

Hazel shot her a flat, unimpressed stare. "It's bad luck to talk about them," she said. She opened her fingers, letting the string fall to the ground, a deliberately dramatic motion. "Anyway, you'd have to have scissors to do it that neat."

"Who's going to bring scissors all the way down here?"

"All right, a knife."

"Don't be thick." She unearthed the tangerine from beneath her pencil case, brushed off shreds of eraser with her palm. She realised, with some disappointment, that she wasn't actually hungry.

"You know Eoghan up the lane? He's always got a knife on him, and I bet it's not just him who's got one either. I bet loads of the St. Jarlath's boys carry them."

"But what would they be coming here for?"

Ah, and there was the eye-roll, the release of irritated breath which signalled the end of the conversation. Hazel had always tended towards pompous superiority; the 'older' twin by an all-important twelve minutes, she no longer needed to assert her authority. Her body did it for her. They didn't speak about it; there was still an awkwardness in addressing this strange adolescent metamorphosis, but they both somehow understood the implication. The first period, those strange, subtle changes that meant Hazel now changed clothes strictly and exclusively in private. Milestones that Tara had not yet reached, leaving her in no-man's-land while Hazel strode towards thirteen with a certain cocksure readiness. "You'll grow in your own time," their mam had told her, but Tara wasn't worried. She felt safe

cocooned in her flat, featureless girl-body, like she was suspended in time. Like she might never change the way Hazel was changing.

She peeled back a flap of tangerine skin with her thumb. The translucent flesh beneath was webbed with white; thick, embossed patches like psoriatic skin. The thought made her vaguely nauseous. She got to her feet, smoothing her dew-damp skirt, and headed towards the shore. Halfway down the gentle slope the grass gave way to a thick rim of loose rock, fragments as big as a fist atop a bed of smaller stones. Silvery water dispersed gently among glistening pebbles. In this place the shore was so quiet and so far from the road Tara could hear the wind sigh off the water, the chorus of leaves in the breeze. Here, the light emerged piecemeal through a glut of still-bare branches; the sunlight lay in bright fragments on the wet grass, and if she sat for long enough she might begin to feel the first prickling of spring warmth in the roots of her scalp.

"Do you want something to eat?" Hazel's voice was tentative, now; a note of hesitance, a hint of shame at her earlier bluster. "I've got a bag of crisps. You can have them if you want?"

In the distance, a cluster of blue-painted boats bobbed gently. She watched them dance on the tide, timing each exhalation to coincide exactly with the moment the boat reached the top of the swell. "I'm not hungry," Tara said.

"You're never hungry." She heard the rustle of the packet as Hazel opened it, the moment's pause before she began to eat them. "Are you cross with me? Don't be cross."

"No." She turned around. Hazel had spread her coat out on the grass and sat there, one white sock half-sunk into the heel of her shoe, dark hair lank and heavy about her face. Old paint speckled the collar of her school jumper. In that moment—pale eyes wide and quizzical—she looked almost a child again.

Tara realised then, with some alarm, that the ground was moving. "Hazel," she blurted, reflexive; the grass undulated with the same slow, sinuous motion of the water behind her, and somehow she could feel it underfoot, the displacement of solid ground beneath her shoes: *rise and fall, rise and fall,* a queasy rhythm. "Hazel, something's wrong."

Hazel looked up. "What? What's wrong?"

She tried to formulate a response, but the act of speaking seemed insurmountably challenging; the effort required to open her mouth, to push each word out past her lips. Her knees buckled; her body felt suddenly boneless, impossible to manoeuvre, and as Hazel leapt up to catch her, she was grateful for her sister's strong arms, lowering her gently to the ground, and the faraway murmur of her name over and over like waves crashing on a distant shore.

The hospital smelled all wrong: sharp and astringent, like the antiseptic Mam used when she or Hazel had grazed a knee. The sheets smelled of the wrong type of laundry powder. And there was so much *noise,* all the time, a strange symphony of beeping machinery and hushed conversation, the keyboard clatter of shoes on linoleum. You couldn't hide away here the way you could by the lough; the curtain around her bed was barely enough to obscure the constant traffic of nurses and doctors and worried parents passing back and forth, and it seemed to Tara that if she could see them, they must surely be able to see her too.

She looked down at her arm. A thick weft of cotton wool was taped to the crook of her elbow. The tape hurt to peel off, so she'd given up trying. The nurse had been gentle, and she'd wanted to seem brave, but the needle had stung so badly that a few tears had still escaped her tightly-shut eyelids. Still, the nurse had smiled, and called her a brave girl. Tara thought she was probably a bit too old for that sort of compliment but she took it with grace, because it seemed to make Mam happy.

Mam had gone to get something to eat, and Dad had taken Hazel home hours before. There was something peculiarly lonely about a hospital bed; the not-quite isolation of the drawn curtains, the way every nurse seemed to know who she was, and why she was here. The way they'd smile, all tight and false, when she asked what was wrong with her. Like they were all in on some kind of secret. Hazel did that sometimes, when she was trying to get in with the older girls. All that stage-whispering, the knowing looks passed between one another

like a message. Hazel's downfall was that Tara didn't care what the big secret was, and had never made a show of pretending. If a secret could be so life-changingly important it made precious little sense to her that it should be kept in a box and passed back and forth between a select few, the way boys at school might pass round a toad caught in a Tupperware container.

She wondered what Hazel was doing now. She wished, not for the first time, that Mam would make good on her promise to let them both have phones. Hazel would have texted her by now, asking if she was all right and, no doubt, fishing for gory details. Sending her dumb jokes that made sense to nobody else but them; obscure references to a lifetime's worth of in-jokes and mythology. Holding her hand, though they were a few miles apart.

The curtain rustled. A tall nurse stepped through. She had boat-broad shoulders, torso as thick and solid as an oak. There was no false cheer about her; she did not even pretend to smile. "Where's your mam?" she asked.

"She went to get coffee," Tara said. And then, because she was tired of all the secrecy and the not-knowing: "Why won't anyone tell me what's wrong with me?" There was a distinctly childlike whine to her voice; she had tried in vain to shed that whine, to cultivate the bolshy, commanding tone she'd heard Hazel utilise. "When will I be able to go home?"

The nurse looked silently at her for a moment. Tara wondered what she saw: a thin broomstick of a girl, wan moon-face and wire-wool hair, all bruised knees and grubby palms. Not a young woman, but a fragile child. She knew this to be true because the nurse visibly softened, touched, apparently, by the fearful petulance of her voice. "We're not sure what's wrong yet," she said. "We need to run a special test to find out."

Tara's brow furrowed. "What sort of test?"

"The doctor thinks that there's something inside your bones that's making you feel poorly. We need to get a special needle and go inside your bones to take a sample of the marrow. It sounds scary, but—"

"I'm not scared," Tara blurted, though even the thought of needles made her faintly queasy. She struggled upright, pulling her lead-heavy

limbs into a sitting position. The effort made her head spin a little bit, but she held firm. "It's okay. You can do the test." Thrusting out a skinny arm, already bruised from the phlebotomist's efforts. Her veins were a bright blue roadmap beneath translucent skin. "And then I can go home, can't I?"

The nurse opened her mouth to speak, but paused, hand poised; she pursed her lips, tucked Tara's defiantly outstretched arm back beneath the blanket with unexpected gentleness. "Yes, probably," she said, patting Tara's shoulder gently with one broad hand, and though she was smiling Tara did not miss the sadness in her eyes, brief but definite, like a cloud that momentarily blots out the sun.

They did not use the word 'cancer' around her, though Tara knew that was what leukemia was: a cancer of the bone marrow, infiltrating the blood. She was in hospital for two days before they eventually let her go, bruised and depleted and heavy with this new burden; these microscopic invaders swirling sluggishly in her veins, masquerading uselessly as white blood cells, unable to fight infection like they were supposed to. Mam and Dad had stayed with her in shifts. Hazel had been all but forbidden to visit; a hospital, Mam said, was not a good place for a young girl to spend too much time. The irony of Tara's sickbed incarceration did not seem to register.

The sunlight seemed too bright as they stepped out into the car park, the sky a vivid, alien blue like a tarpaulin draped over the curve of the Earth. Tara put one foot in front of the other, steady all the way to the car. She put on her seatbelt, staring out of the window as the hospital receded, as Galway receded. She understood that everything had changed, but somehow nothing felt any different: the car still smelled like wet dog and lemon air freshener, Dad still sang loudly along to Merle Haggard on the radio, and still got the words all wrong. And perhaps Mam looked a little more tired than usual, her skin a little more creased, like she'd got older overnight, but two days carting back and forth between Galway and home would make anyone tired, wouldn't it? Mam looked back at her and

smiled—a too-tight smile, full of teeth—and asked if she would like to go to Mr Waffle for lunch, because wasn't Mr Waffle her favourite? Tara shook her head mutely in response; the thought of food held no appeal whatsoever. She understood then, from the sudden glassy-eyed despair on her mam's face, that everything really had changed.

It was the way Hazel shrank away from her as she walked through the door that hurt the most. More than the needles and the blood-pressure cuff like a vice around her bicep, more than the deep, pulsating ache in her hip where they'd pierced the bone and sucked out the marrow. That look of helpless horror on her sister's face; limbs drawn sharply inwards, head tucked into her chest, like she could smell the cancer emanating from Tara and was trying desperately to keep it out of her lungs.

Hazel said nothing as Mam led Tara up the stairs, into her room—*her* room, not *their* room, because they were almost teenagers now, and Dad had partitioned the master bedroom the previous year so that they would have the privacy everyone seemed to believe they would need. Tara sat on the edge of her bed, staring over at the wall; the *Adventure Time* posters and the half-finished crochet projects trailing pink wool like innards across the desk, the stupid sunflower-yellow paint she'd argued so hard to have and quickly grew to hate. And somewhere on the other side, Hazel's bed; her pared-down décor, all visible traces of childhood purged. If she died, Tara wondered, would they take the partition down so that Hazel might have the whole room to herself? Would she throw out all of Tara's things—scrunching her nose in disdain at her cuddly toys and her glitter pens—or would they leave everything exactly as it was, perfectly preserved, the crease of the bedclothes the last solid proof that Tara had ever existed in corporeal form?

She hadn't cried when the doctor had explained to her just how sick she was, when she'd told her she would have to spend a few weeks in hospital while they blasted her body with chemicals to kill off the cancer ('disease', she'd called it, like it was only the flu). But

here, now—bone-tired and sore, stomach like a clenched fist, staring at the paraphernalia of her childhood—she let the fear and the anger and the sharp-edged unreality of the past few days wash over her, a cold black tide closing in over her head. She allowed herself to sink, to yield to the unbearable pressure, an anvil placed directly over her heart, crushing her lungs until it was all she could do to draw in each tearful, gasping breath. It wasn't the realisation that she might be dying that broke her but the way Hazel had recoiled, appalled by her sickness; not the thought of dying, but the thought of dying without her sister by her side. The thought of dying alone.

She woke in the middle of the night to the sound of someone else's breathing, the sticky-soled patter of warm feet on floorboards. She peeled her eyelids open, wiping away crust with her knuckles; it felt as though she had been dragged from the most abyssal depths of sleep but that couldn't possibly have been so.

Hazel was a grey silhouette in the light peeking through the curtains; her hair was rumpled and her pyjamas a little askew. She shambled towards the bed, and Tara lifted the sheets, an automatic motion, scooting up against the wall to make space for her sister. When they were smaller and shared a bedroom, they would do this all the time; one would creep across the room, into the other's bed, and they would lie side by side, talking very quietly until they inevitably dropped off to sleep. Tara couldn't remember exactly when they'd stopped; it just seemed strange, suddenly, to share such close proximity, though they had never thought much about it as children. Tonight, it felt comforting. Her cold bones slowly absorbed the warmth of Hazel's body, and the sound of her breathing reassured Tara that for now at least, she was still alive.

She felt the tickle of Hazel's hair as she turned, shifting her weight. Tara felt strangely flimsy beside her, as though she was only a piece of carefully-folded origami beside Hazel's flesh and bone and substance.

"I know your secret," Hazel whispered.

"Being sick isn't a secret," Tara muttered. Then, for emphasis: "*Cancer* isn't a secret. Mam's already rung school. Everyone will know by now."

Hazel was silent, and anxiety needled at Tara's stomach; she wondered what she'd said to upset her. Was it the C-word, spoken so blatantly? Should she have cushioned it in comfortable euphemisms, made it sound less threatening, less alien?

"I didn't mean *that,*" Hazel said, after a time.

"Then what? I don't have any secrets. I tell you everything. You know that." She stared up at the ceiling, suddenly irritable. She felt bruised all over, her joints like poorly-oiled hinges. She imagined the cancer cells swarming inside her; ugly little blobs consuming and multiplying, heavy in her veins. It seemed very unfair, suddenly, that Hazel should feel uncomfortable with Tara's illness when she was the one being eaten alive. "I don't feel very well, so either stop being a gowl or go back to your own bed."

Hazel ought to have apologised, then, as she usually did when Tara snapped. Instead, she slipped wordlessly out of the bed. Tara squeezed her eyes shut, waiting for the sound of feet receding towards the door, the creak of the floorboard in the hall, perhaps the huffy slamming of her door despite the hour. There was nothing.

Her eyes opened. Hazel stood there, very still, staring down at Tara. Her lips were curved slightly upwards, an almost absent half-smile. Distant, as though caught in a blissful daydream. She leaned down until her mouth was level with Tara's face; she could feel Hazel's breath like a warm wind brushing past the coracle of her ear.

"I know you're not really Tara," she whispered.

She left on feather-light feet, almost dancing to the door. Pride, Tara realised, and a shiver ran the length of her body. She felt suddenly feverish as she pulled the covers up over her head. A strange, sick sensation boiled in her stomach as she recalled the uncanny smile, the way Hazel had loomed in the dark like a ghost at her bedside. She did not know the meaning of her sister's proclamation, but she knew that Hazel believed, absolutely and without question, that she was right.

Three days later they admitted Tara to the children's ward. She would spend the next few weeks in hospital, perhaps longer. There were other words, things Tara did not understand but took to be important: something about abnormally low neutrophils and platelets, culminating in a promise that they would be extra careful to avoid exposure to bacteria and viruses. Mam scribbled a list on a notepad of all the things she must avoid eating, although Tara did not feel like eating much more than the occasional slice of toast.

She'd been out of hospital barely even a week before they took her back in. It seemed that every time Tara began to process what was happening to her there was a fresh deluge of information. She cast her arms about, frantically gathering the few snippets she understood before they drifted away from her. She brought a notepad to the hospital, a pencil case: *Here are the facts,* she wrote, because it felt like something she ought to document. Perhaps she could start a blog once she had her thoughts in order. If she ever got them in order. She wrote with felt tips, using a different colour for every numerical point: *1) My name is Tara Marie Madigan. I am twelve years old, thirteen in June. 2) I am sick with lukemia 3) I have a twin sister called Hazel Sian Madigan who is not sick 4) I might die, tho the dr says there is 'every chance you will make a full recovery'. I think the dr is telling lies, because I heard mam crying last night and she hardly ever cries about anything.*

Her pen hovered above the page, uncertain.

5) hazel says I am not really tara. I don't understand what she

"What're you writing there?"

Tara threw an arm over her notebook. "None of your business," she said, glaring up at Hazel, whose schoolbag was slung over her shoulder. She grinned at Tara like she knew some kind of brilliant secret and did not intend to share it. "Shouldn't Mam and Dad be with you?"

"They went to get coffee."

Hazel dug into her bag, unearthing an exercise book and accompanying novel, which she placed on Tara's bedside table. "What's the point of being off sick if you're just going to do school work?"

"I don't want to fall behind." The smell of wet earth rose, rich and familiar. Tara peered down at Hazel's shoes. The soles were rimmed

with thick mud, sprigs of torn-up grass. "Did you go to the lough without me?"

Hazel shrugged. "I had to check the traps," she said. Her eyes briefly appraised Tara's curled-up body: legs pulled up to her skinny bird's chest, the port they'd installed there barely a lump beneath her pyjamas. She peered up at Hazel through the dark wisps of her fringe; was Hazel checking her for changes? Was she assessing the Tara-ness of her appearance?

But that's our place, Tara thought. *We always go together. We always have.* She closed her notebook, recapped the felt pen. "They won't let me outside at all," she said, tilting her head so she could better see Hazel. "Isn't the lough a bit quiet on your own? Does the house feel strange without me there?"

"It feels strange without *Tara* there." Hazel's face was entirely serious now, no ghostly smile or knowing look in the eye. "How long has it been *you,* anyway? Do you even remember?"

Tara sighed. "Hazel, I don't understand a word you're saying. I *am* Tara. I've always been Tara." She paused, biting back her irritation before it could blossom into anger. "You've only been acting this way since I came back from hospital. What, are you scared of me dying? Is that why you're pretending I'm someone else?"

Her nose wrinkled. "Why would I be scared of *you* dying?" she said. Her face contorted; an expression of faint disdain so genuine that a sudden anxiety seized Tara's muscles, a sharp and unpleasant electric shock. She was used to Hazel's moods, her fits of random cruelty—the cat-and-mouse compulsion to wound, to maim, gone almost as quickly as it arrived. This, though; this was not *that*. Tara felt the sincerity of Hazel's words as sharp as a fist to the jaw.

"Who…" The rest of the question seemed stuck in her throat, a solid glut of words lodged somewhere deep. She swallowed hard. "Who do you think I am, Hazel? If I'm not Tara, then who am I?"

The disdain deepened until it looked almost like pity. "You *know* what you are," she said. There was no malice, no aggression. She sounded bored, like this was a game she had grown tired of playing. "They've been setting off all the traps. Even the secret ones I put there,

the ones you don't know about. That's how I know they've been watching us."

"Who? Who are you talking about?"

"The little people," Hazel said. "The *faeries.* I'm not sure exactly when they switched you. It's hard to say. You were very good at being Tara for a while, but you've not been so good at it lately. I *know* my sister. She's always been a bit soft and a bit whiny, but not like you. I knew there was no way Tara could change so much, not in such a short time." Her eyes fixed on Tara's, pale and intense. "You know why you're sick, don't you? It's not leukemia or anything like that. It's because you've been away for too long. Because this isn't your world. It doesn't matter how much medicine they give you. You'll get sicker and sicker and then you'll die."

"You're not serious." It was ridiculous. *Hazel* was ridiculous. And yet when Tara searched her sister's face for some sign of spite, some hint of gleeful, bright-eyed mockery, she saw nothing but smug triumph. The broad, satisfied grin of one who believed they had everything figured out.

"They usually switch people when they're babies. *Changeling.* That's the word for you. They take the real person back to *their* world and leave something else behind. Sometimes they make you out of wood. Mad, isn't it? A magic lump of wood made to look like a person. And sometimes, they leave one of their own behind. But don't worry." Gentle now, placing a consoling hand on Tara's shoulder. Hazel felt warm, alive; a strong pulse beat in the cup of her palm, an abundance of hot, healthy blood. "I'm going to sort all of this out. I'm going to find Tara and bring her home. And then you can go home too."

But I am home, Tara thought, desperate; she wanted to grab Hazel's stupid fat shoulders, to shake her until her brain rattled in her skull, yell at her full in the face: *I am your sister. I have always been your sister. You can't just imagine me away because you're afraid. You can't just abandon me when I need you most.*

Instead, she asked: "If I'm a faery, or…or a piece of magic bloody wood or *whatever* you think I am, how come Mam and Dad still think I'm me?"

"Parents always think their kids are perfect," Hazel said. "When I find Tara and bring her home, Mam and Dad won't realise anything's changed. When Tara gets better, they'll say it's a miracle. I'll take you down to the lough and you'll go back to your world, and they'll never know the truth." Her smile was indulgent. Sharp at the edges. "I'll know, though."

On her fifth day in hospital Tara spiked a fever.

At first it was mild; her muscles grew taut with the imaginary cold, breaking out into shivering fits. She lay depleted and miserable, slipping in and out of sleep; there was a stack of books on her bedside table, an iPod with earbuds dangling just out of reach. She lacked the energy to grab for them. The idea of focusing on a book for long enough to take any of it in seemed laughable. She lay, and her body trembled, and the sweat glued her fringe to her forehead, her face to the pillow. When she dozed, she dreamed of a turbulent sea, spray crashing over the side of her tiny boat; she dreamed that black clouds were gathering, and that she was sailing straight towards them.

The fire inside of her grew, feeding on the meagre fuel of her depleted body; dead cells and poisoned dregs, burning up her flesh as she drifted in and out of a fitful sleep. It grew increasingly difficult to tell when she was awake. The world seemed wrong, somehow; too bright, too colourful. Everyone seemed blurred at the edges, leaving faint trails when they moved like dissipating stains. She imagined she could taste it, the essence of everyone who had been near her, everyone who had shared the same air as her, like ash from a crematorium filtering up her nose, into her mouth. She chased the trails with lazy fingers, imagined them sifting between like sand.

There were loud voices. Sharp stings which must have been wasps; if she squinted, she could see them, small and fast against the blue walls. She swatted as they came close, determined that they would not harm her again, but then someone was holding her down, cold hands against her hot skin, whispering words she could only partly understand: *medicine, it's only medicine, you want to get better, don't you?*

If it's medicine, she thought, collapsing back onto her sweat-soaked pillow, *how come it's making everything worse?*

It came to her between dreams, in that grey, liminal space where she was neither asleep nor truly awake. A memory spark, weak and sputtering but there, a small point of clarity in the fever-fog: *sometimes, they make you out of wood. Of course,* she thought, looking down at herself—twig-limbs and stick-girl body, hospital pyjamas like loose, hanging skin. Hazel was mad, but perhaps in that madness there was a truth. Her body was on fire, and fire consumed wood. Fire gobbled wood up and left only ashes.

Struggling, she reached up with one bent-branch arm. The water jug was set high on the bedside table, but she snagged it with her fingers; the minute crackle of bark as she clasped the handle, dragged the plastic jug off the edge. The lid slipped off. Water sloshed from the spout, a great cold gout of it soaking through the thin stuff of her pyjamas. She gasped involuntarily at the sudden chill. Carefully, she poured the rest of the jug over herself, anointing her forehead with it, her belly, her legs. Water to quell the flames. Medicine was for flesh, for blood; she was bark and sap and dry, smouldering wood. She was sure of that now, as sure as she was of anything.

She left the jug empty on the bed beside her. Already the water had begun to evaporate, rising from her hot skin like smoke. Fingernails pried at the uncomfortable protrusion where they had placed the port, anchoring in the skin; if she could just peel off that useless coating, get to the bark beneath, she could douse the embers before the fire sparked back up. Her nails were rough-edged stubs, prying at the plaster, peeling it back; she caught the skin with the edge of a nail, opened up a long, thin rift. Dark blood welled up in the gap. It seemed odd, she thought, that there should be blood there at all. Diligent, she worked at the seam with her fingernails, pulling back the meagre flesh, and *there,* just beneath the skin, the barest glimpse of ragged bark.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph."

She looked up. Someone was there, watching her; their face drifted in and out of focus, though she could see the whites of their eyes, the dark hole of a wide-open mouth. She lifted her hands. Her

thin fingers glistened red. "There's a fire," she said, but her lips felt strange, her voice like treacle in her throat.

"She's burning up," someone else said. They seemed to be standing beside her, though she wasn't sure how they'd got there. "She must be hallucinating."

"Jesus. Hallucinating *what?*"

"Someone get Doctor Conver. Keeley, we need to get this port back in."

The noise washed over her, peaceful, meaning nothing at all. Someone was holding her hands up, examining the tips of her fingers. *The buds are blooming,* she wanted to say. *There'll be blossoms soon*. But the fire was coming back, and the heat of it was making her drowsy. She closed her eyes. In her dreams she was at the lough, and the wind was loud in the trees. Far away, on the other side of the water, someone was calling to her. She raised her arm, wiggling her twig-fingers in greeting, and marvelled at the beautiful red flowers bursting from the tips, bright and glossy in the sunshine.

She spent more time asleep than awake. Consciousness required an effort she felt barely capable of; she could barely tolerate the constant sourness in her stomach, the taste of bile in the back of her throat no matter how much gum she chewed. Mam and Dad came and went. They would talk to her, read to her; they would feed her miserable little morsels of cake and lemonade, then despair as she brought it all back up again minutes later. She would smile between bouts of desperate retching, reassure them that she was feeling better than she looked, and then she would ask if they could read to her for a bit while she rested her eyes. Sleep came mercifully quick, a black and blissful totality. She did not dream; she simply shut down.

There were discussions with Doctor Conver. She could barely follow them, except to understand that she was not improving as much as they had hoped. Doctor Conver looked like she was Mam's age, a fat, pretty woman with sandy blonde hair and a spattering of freckles; she wore a severe white labcoat over sequinned jumpers,

gaudily patterned blouses, necklaces as bright and chunky as *Dolly Mixtures.* She smiled even when the news was bad, and Tara understood this was not for her benefit—she *knew* how bad things were, she felt it every waking moment—but for Mam and Dad's. It was a small measure of hope, and they clung to it the way a dying man clings to a priest's absolution.

She did not understand the words Doctor Conver used—*her white cells are barely adequate, her platelet count is not improving, we need to do another biopsy to see if the chemo has worked*—but she understood what it meant. She was not getting better. She would not get better; the next infection she contracted would be the last. The fever would burn her to ashes. They continued the chemo anyway, because there was nothing else they could do, and because sometimes, Doctor Conver told her, the most powerful medicine of all was hope.

After a while, it hurt to look at Mam and Dad. The too-gentle way they'd smile at her. The way they'd feed her little questions, fishing desperately for anything they might interpret as good news: *I ate some lunch today. I read a few pages of my homework. I walked to the toilet and back by myself.* She would lay still with her eyes closed, feigning sleep until it overtook her for real. Her fingers would pry at the gauze taped to her chest, covering her wounds; she would press with the pad of her thumb and feel the hard, flat planes of her sternum pushing up beneath her emaciated flesh. *I am a real person,* she told herself, though the hallucination was still vivid in her mind; she could remember, with startling clarity, the way the blood-wet bark had looked in the cleft of her torn skin.

In the end, they let her go home. "We'll bring her back for a biopsy in a few days," Doctor Conver told them. "But for now, it's best for Tara to recuperate in her own environment. She's been through a lot here. It'll be good for her to spend time in familiar surroundings."

The last time she saw her parents—her *flesh* parents, tired and ragged but solid, reassuring, refusing to give up despite her continual failure to improve—she asked if they would read for her. She intended to stay awake this time, though her body was a crudely-stitched patchwork of aches and niggles, and her bed was not as comfortable as she remembered it to be. Mam plucked a book from the shelf. She

smiled gently, pink lipsticked mouth and powdered skin, exhausted but still striving for normality.

"I'll read your favourite," Mam said, and lifted the book so she could see the cover: stark, black and white, well-loved and well-thumbed. *Noughts and Crosses.* She knew instantly she had never seen it before. She knew she ought to have. She lay there, fighting to stay awake as Mam read her Tara's favourite story, savouring every word for the first time, and she wondered how it was possible that Hazel could have known everything all along.

She felt Hazel shaking her, pulling her from the warm depths of sleep: "Wake up. It's time to go."

"Time to go where?" She rubbed the back of her eye with one hand. A faint greyish light suffused the room, spilling in through a gap in the curtains; the sky outside was dark still. It was not yet dawn. "Hazel, what time is it?"

"Ssh." A finger pressed to the lips. Hazel was fully clothed; she wore grubby white trainers, her school parka. "You'll wake Mam and Dad. Come on, get dressed. We're going to the lough."

Her bones felt hollow; cracked open and sucked dry, all her marrow turned to dust. It seemed that there was nothing left inside of her but thin, watery blood and the last dregs of poison. "Don't talk shite," she muttered, pressing her face into the pillow. "We're not going anywhere. It's the middle of the night. Let me sleep."

She felt Hazel's hands on her shoulders, gently prying her up off the mattress; she was featherlight, a doll in Hazel's arms. "There's barely anything left of you now," she said, not unkindly. "Come on, now. It's time to go home."

"Home." This had been home once. She looked around the bedroom, at the artefacts she had borrowed. The pieces of a life she had appropriated, unintentionally. "Does that mean you found her?"

Hazel only smiled.

It took a long time to walk to the lough, though it was not far away. She had not walked properly in weeks, and for a moment it

seemed she had forgotten how; her legs refused to coordinate, her feet were numb slabs tucked into ill-fitting shoes. Hazel wrapped a strong arm around her waist, taking her paltry weight. They looked like a couple of drunks staggering down the road, off the path and into the woods, where there was only a weak and fading moonlight to guide them. The ground was uneven; tree roots burst up through the loam but Hazel was surefooted, guiding her towards the flat black waters of the lough. The smell of brine rose sharp in her nostrils and she welcomed it, flushing out the lingering antiseptic stink of the hospital. This, she knew, was what home smelled like.

Hazel helped her sit. Cold dew seeped through the thin cotton of her pyjamas. She was exhausted; her spine sagged, her head heavy. Her chest ached horribly with each shallow, gasping breath. "It's okay," Hazel said, lowering her down onto the grass. "Lay down, if you like. Rest for a bit. They won't be long."

She felt Hazel's hands soft against her hair. The wet grass cool beneath her face. The woods stretched out before them, a thick and impenetrable copse; in the dark they looked vast and infinite.

"Look," Hazel whispered. "They're coming for you."

In the distance, between the trees, a faint golden glow. The sound of twigs snapping underfoot. Voices, indistinct but definite. A pleasant warmth leached in through her skin, slowly filling her veins like hot blood trickling through a slender needle. The light grew in intensity as they drew closer, a small sun rising in the depths of the copse. She thought she could see, as she shut her eyes against the glow, a cluster of small, slender silhouettes slipping between the trees, too-long limbs and eyes burning like stars. And a broader silhouette, a little way ahead of them, running full-pelt towards the lough; her own face, worn on strong, healthy shoulders, tear-streaked and smiling and full of life.

LOOKING FOR LAIKA

i. two suns in the sunset

"There are footprints on the moon," Grandad says.

The sea air tastes bloody in the back of Pete's throat. The shingle clatters and shifts underfoot, conspiring to turn ankles. The moon hangs low in the sky, fat and proud, a globule of milk suspended in time.

And Beverley—who is five years old, and ought to be in bed but insists on following Pete everywhere he goes—turns her face to the sky and squints up, as though from this distance she might be able to divine anything from the grey Rorschach blots mottling its surface. "What kind of footprints?" she asks. "People footprints? Do people live on the moon?"

"It was before you and Peter were born," Grandad says. "They put men in a spaceship and sent them all the way up there to have a look."

"But why?"

Pete does not look up at the sky. He resents the possibility that this is a ploy to make him do so, to reassure him that the sky contains wonder as well as danger. His eyes stray downwards to the horizon, where the distant lights glow warm across the sea. How safe would the Isle of Wight be, he wonders, allowing himself, just for a moment, to indulge the illusion that anywhere at all might be safe. How long would it take for the radiation to make it across the Solent?

"Because we could." Grandad smiles at Beverley. Her face is crowned with dark, wild curls, turned resolutely to the heavens. "They looked up at the moon and they thought, well, why not? Oh, it

took a lot of work, though. Years and years of work. You can't just take a bus to the moon, can you? Back then they weren't even sure you could send a man into space. They did all sorts of mad experiments. They sent frogs and monkeys up in rockets. They even sent a dog."

"A *dog?*" Beverley's nose is wrinkled in consternation, but there is a glimmer in her eyes. She adores dogs, pesters Mum every Christmas for a puppy even though they live in a tiny flat on the fifth floor. Besides which, a dog would be a dangerous thing; there's the possibility of emotional attachment, that they might view the dog as a 'part of the family,' another warm body to compete for resources should the worst happen. Pete has not accounted for pets in any of his plans.

"It was the Ruskies who sent her up," Grandad says, turning his gaze to the sky; his hair is pale and fine as mist. He looks old. Pete used to think Grandad would live forever. "Laika, her name was. Poor thing must've been terrified, all on her own up there."

Beverley shoves her hands in her cardigan pockets, sagging heavily with all the seashells and pebbles she has collected, magpie-compulsive. Her clothes smell like brine and damp wool, and her spoils are lined up meticulously on the veranda, arranged by size and shape and colour. "What happened to her, Grandad?" she asks. She extracts one hand from her pocket; the stone in her palm is smooth-edged, streaked cream and terracotta like the surface of Jupiter. Grandad plucks it from her hand, rolls it around in his wide, weathered palm.

Pete does not know Laika's story, but he is astute enough to put the pieces together. A Russian space dog blasted into orbit before man had so much as dipped a toe in the Sea of Tranquillity. Even if she'd somehow survived the experience, she must surely be long dead now. But Beverley is five years old. She still believes in Father Christmas; the stunning improbability of a thirty-year old space dog does not even register. Her dark doe-eyes are wide and earnest. Pete envies the totality of her innocence; he hates the thought that someday she will know the world the way he does.

But Grandad is a weaver of tall tales, a great believer in the magic of stories.

"Still out there, I should imagine," Grandad says, with a shrug. "Floating around in her little spaceship. She'll be a long way past the moon, now. Somewhere off in the Milky Way. I wonder what kind of things she's seen?" Carefully, Grandad kneels, joints folding slowly like rusted hinges. He places one hand on Beverley's shoulder, holds the other up; the Jupiter stone rests between his thumb and forefinger, a twin moon perfectly transposed against the star-spattered sky.

ii. life on mars?

Pete keeps his disaster plan in a wire-bound notebook. He has a section at the back designated for rough notes, a place to scribble down new pieces of information and ideas for evaluation; they may go on to form part of his plan, if he deems them practical. Nan and Grandad had tried to persuade him to leave the notebook at home: *you won't need it at the caravan, it's perfectly safe there. Why don't you switch that brain of yours off for a bit?*

But Pete is not stupid. He knows that Mum would only throw the notebook out if he left it behind. As though erasing all his careful planning might also erase the possibility of nuclear war; as though it might shut off the constant, frantic din inside his head, the eerie wail of imagined sirens dragging him breathless and terrified from the depths of sleep.

Nan says Pete has a 'nervous condition.' Grandad says Pete just thinks too much.

"I'm bored," Beverley announces. "Tell me a story, Pete."

The caravan bedroom is small: two narrow single beds separated by a sliver of floor, a flash of ugly yellow-orange carpet. Cupboards overhead house spare blankets, Beverley's old plastic tea set, a Ludo game with half the pieces missing. Beverley's feet are on the pillow. Her socks are grass-stained; her big toe has begun to wear a hole through the fabric.

He sighs. Uncurls his legs from their slack half-lotus, placing his Walkman on the narrow nightstand between the two beds. It is a huge, unwieldy thing. It is his most prized possession. "What kind of story?"

"One about Laika."

Duck-egg curtains flap listlessly in the scant breeze; hazy sky the colour of old denim, the scent of bone-dry earth. Grandad is napping in the living room, and Beverley is supposed to stay in during the hottest hours in case she burns, even though her dad was Trinidadian; she has skin like warm sand, and Pete is so pale he is almost blue.

"Why are you so interested in her? She's only a dog."

"She is not *only a dog.*" Her face contorts, a caricature of indignation: she looks so much like their mother when she's angry. "She was in *space.* I want you to tell me that story." It is not a request.

He leans back against the pillow, stretches out his feet so they touch the opposite wall. He is tall for his thirteen years; he presumes he takes after his father, who, Mum says, was a long, tall Scotsman with an acoustic guitar and a voice like honey. He has never seen a picture of his dad.

"Once upon a time," he begins, "there was a dog called Laika."

Beverley rolls her eyes, dramatic.

"Do you want a story or not?" She doesn't reply. Pete continues: "Once upon a time there was a dog called Laika, and she had a secret mission. She was the best and smartest dog in all of Russia, and the President knew he could trust her better than anyone else, because dogs are so loyal. The President knew that the world was in trouble, and that one day soon someone might press a button and destroy everything. And he wanted to make sure his people would have somewhere to escape to when that happened. So Laika's mission was very important."

"What was her mission?"

"Be patient. I was just getting to that. The Russian President told Laika they were sending her into space so that she could find a new planet for people to live on. First, they would send her to the moon. Then to Mars, and Saturn, and all the other planets in the solar system. She knew what kind of planet people would need, because dogs need all the same things as people. They made her a special dog-sized spaceship, and a dog-shaped spacesuit, so she could go outside the ship and explore the planets, and decide whether people would be able to live there or not.

"Well. The moon was no good. It was too cold, and there was no air to breathe. And the earth was all rocky, so you couldn't grow plants there. So Laika set off for Mars. And Mars was even worse, so she went to Saturn, and Jupiter, and then Neptune and Uranus but they were all made of gas, so you couldn't build houses on them or live on them. But Laika was determined, so she went all the way to the edge of the solar system to find the last planet."

Beverley is sitting up now. Sunshine filters in through a gap in the curtains, embossing her dark hair with pale gold filigree. "And then what happened?"

"The last planet was Pluto." The story spins itself; it emerges fully-formed and fluent, like lyrics to an old song. "It was such a long way from the sun that everything there was dark. When Laika stepped out of her spaceship, she saw that the whole planet was made of ice. By that time, she was ready to give up. All those planets and not a single one was right. She decided to turn around and go back home. She would tell the Russian President how sorry she was that she failed in her mission."

"I don't like this story anymore," Beverley says.

"Be patient," Pete says again, and weathers the brief, fierce challenge of her disapproving stare; when she is older, she will be a force of nature. "Laika got back in her dog-sized spaceship, and set the controls to take her back home. The spaceship rose up into the sky, such a long way up that when she looked out of her window Pluto was only a small dot, like a little hailstone floating in space. And when she looked up at all the other planets she'd left behind, she realised that they were all small dots as well. In fact, they looked just like stars. That was when Laika realised that all the stars she could see in the distance might be planets too, and maybe some of them might not be such a long way away. Laika was a clever dog, and a very brave dog, and she did not want to give up on saving all of those people."

"So she decided to go and find all the other planets instead," Beverley adds. She considers this for a moment, assessing its worth as an addendum. "And…and there were lots, lots more bad planets. But she thought that if she kept looking, she would find a good one. And everybody would be so happy, and maybe they would give her

a medal, and a bone, and a big party. And that's why she's still flying around in space, trying to find a good planet for us to live on."

He doesn't correct the logistical errors; it's a stupid story anyway. "Yes," he says. Outside, car tyres crunch against gravel. Nan has returned from town with her shopping. It's time to wake Grandad. "That's exactly what she did."

iii. goodbye blue sky

He doesn't know when the panic attacks are going to come. Sometimes there's a dizziness, the sense that the world is mounted on ball bearings and tilting ever so slightly; a faint blur at the edges of everything. Sometimes there's a taste on his tongue like something charred and bloody. There's nowhere to turn. Mum is usually absent, working irregular hours or else sprawled on the settee, watching television without really watching it, regarding his teary-eyed pronouncements that he might be dying with dull, placid eyes. She tells him to go to bed, that he'll be okay in the morning, and he lies awake until the small hours, when she finally switches off the television. He always forgives her; she hasn't been quite right since Beverley's dad died.

When the attacks come, he puts on his headphones and presses 'play.' It doesn't matter what the song is; when his brain fills with sound it pushes the white noise of his panic aside, drowns it slowly under percussion and bass and wailing guitar. He mouths the lyrics, breathes in time with the singer; the staccato rhythm of his own terrified hyperventilation slows, the sensation of his heart beating in his throat begins to subside. And because the tapes belong to Mum, it almost feels as though she is the one comforting him.

Nothing bad is going to happen, Mum always says in that bland, faraway voice. *Stop thinking about it.* And he tries so hard to block those thoughts out but the harder he pushes the more they come, and worse. Not just whispered *what ifs* but images: the flat ruined and smouldering, Mum and Beverley nothing more than shadows burned into the rubble and him, trapped and alone, watching as the fallout drifts down to meet him like snow.

Once, his Walkman ran out of batteries. He'd scrabbled about his bedroom for spares, found nothing but a single, long-dead battery at the bottom of his sock drawer. The thought of asking Mum—of being faced with that empty stare, as though he were a ghost on the periphery of her vision—had sent his stomach freefalling into an imagined abyss, and he'd felt suddenly hollow, like a great void had opened up somewhere inside of him. He'd curled up on the floor, unable even to clamber up onto his bed, and that was where Beverley had found him—minutes, hours, maybe days later.

"Are you sick?" she'd asked.

"I might be dying," he'd mumbled. There was an invisible rope cinched around his ribcage, pulling tighter; it seemed impossible to fill his lungs.

She'd lain on the floor beside him. Her dark eyes were solemn. "Do you need a cup of water?"

Through gritted teeth: "I need it to *stop*."

"I wish you wouldn't be sad all the time."

He'd pulled his legs up to his chest until he was a tight ball, pressing his forehead hard against his knees. Cocooned in on himself, he'd heard Beverley's retreat and her return, dragging something heavy across the carpet. He'd lain there with his eyes shut, counting each heartbeat (too fast, too hard, about to explode, about to stop any moment).

And then there'd been something soft nestled against his face, and the gentle pressure of a blanket drawn across him. The smell of washing powder. He'd opened his eyes a crack and there was Beverley, cross-legged beside him with *Where the Wild Things Are* open on her lap. She'd brought a chair in from the kitchen, strung a fleece blanket between it and Pete's bed, forming a makeshift canopy. Her yellow daisy bedsheet was tucked around him from neck to feet; her precious stuffed dog placed with infinite care upon Pete's face. Smiling brightly as she'd passed him the book, unabashedly expectant. He'd taken the book with shaking fingers, brought it close to his face. Taken a deep, shuddering breath, and began to read.

iv. castles made of sand

Long, hot days by the sea pass slow as honey. Beverley in her new swimming costume and purple jelly sandals, dancing in and out of the cold waves, shrieking with joy as the incoming tide chases her up the beach. Slate-grey water in the morning, blue-green in the hazy afternoon sun; the waves refract shards of blinding white light like stars swallowed up and drowned.

They loll on the grass in the shade of pink-striped windbreakers and eat neon-bright ice lollies that taste like nothing in nature. Pete listens to the tapes Mum made him: Pink Floyd and T-Rex and David Bowie, Jethro Tull and The Kinks. Kate Bush's eerie banshee wail gives him goosebumps despite the warm sunshine. Grandad listens to the cricket on the radio, switching it off abruptly whenever the news comes on, aware as he is of Pete's Pavlovian panic response to the word Soviets, the sound of Reagan's voice. Beverley helps Nan plant bright marigolds in green plastic pots, pressing Beverley's shells and stones carefully into the soil, spiralling perfectly outwards like a Roman mosaic. The dry grass smells dusty and sweet as the sun slopes behind the caravans.

Every night, before he goes to sleep, Pete unearths his disaster plan from the depths of his rucksack and reads over the first page. This is the condensed form of the plan: the instructions which will save them when the bomb is dropped, and each line is seared irreversibly into his brain like a Hiroshima shadow. He does not read for knowledge; it is a ritual, turning tentatively to the first page, creased now, so familiar that he knows precisely where his thumb should sit, running his forefinger down the page like Kabbalistic braille. He knows that to neglect this ritual even for a day is to invite disaster. It's a simple equation: contentment is complacency, complacency is death.

In the afternoon they stroll along East Beach where, Grandad says, he once saw a school of sharks swimming just offshore. "They come in to eat the crabs in the shallows," he says. The lifeboat station stands just beyond, the walkway a skeletal silhouette against the bright afternoon sky. "They're not dangerous sharks. They don't have sharp teeth or anything like that. They're gummy sharks. Like Nanny when

she's not got her dentures in." He sucks his lips in around his teeth and chomps at Nan. She elbows him, mock-offended, though there is laughter in her eyes; she has skin like tree bark, but she covers all the silver in her hair with chestnut dye, and she can walk for miles without stopping.

There is a hut on the beach where they sell fresh seafood, crab sandwiches. It smells sharp and briny, like rocks at low tide. Beverley is fascinated by the pearlescent gloss of the mussel shells. Pete stares at the crabs packed in among the ice. There is something unnerving about them, curled up and flesh-hued; they lay in rows, dead limbs folded across their bodies as though bracing for impact. Black, sightless eyes stare out, past him; as though in death they are fixated still on the very last thing they saw.

They're just crabs, he reminds himself. They don't feel anything.

When night falls, the rabbits come out. They are invisible until the sweep of car headlights sends them scattering for cover, their white tails flashing in unison like bright eyes in the dark. Grandad says there are all kinds of wild creatures out there, especially at night. Pete finds this reassuring. There is comfort in knowing that life continues even when you're not there to observe it. He wonders if they will survive if the bomb comes; if they can run fast enough, hide long enough.

Beverley has her own bedtime ritual, and Pete is as familiar with the words as he is with the contents of his notebook. She and Nan recite the same lines every night, a quaint incantation invoking the protection of the old windmill which stands at the entrance to the caravan park:

"Goodnight sea," they say together. "Goodnight stars. Goodnight rabbits. Goodnight windmill. Thank you for keeping all the monsters away. See you when the sun comes up!"

They'd told him the same thing when he was young. No monsters or baddies or nasty men could get him because the windmill kept them all out. He'd never questioned why or how; the talismanic power of the windmill had simply been a fact passed down from Nan and Grandad, who knew everything about the world. He has never told Beverley the truth.

He clutches his notebook. Presses his finger against the page. Feels the crease of the paper, as familiar as his own skin. Wishes he still believed in the windmill.

v. dreamer

The sea is liquid mercury. The lifeboat station slumps into the water, the brutal angle of a snapped limb. Waves break slow and silent, a great grey tongue lapping at the shore.

Where there were pebbles there is now only powder. This, he thinks, is what the surface of the moon must look like. Dust, as far as the eye can see, though the slow churn of the sea betrays its terrestrial nature. He leaves footprints behind him; the creases of his soles are detailed perfectly in the dust. He walks towards the water, aware how loud his own heartbeat sounds, how harsh the hiss of each exhalation. He is dimly aware that he must be breathing poison.

At the seam between land and water there is a faint pinkish rim, revealed as the tide recedes like a hint of thigh beneath a silk skirt. Thousands of crabs, a vista of cracked, glistening shells, bodies piled upon bodies as though they were only tight-packed pebbles, black eyes beseeching to nobody in particular. Their carapaces are the colour of old skin. From this distance, they might be the skulls of long-dead children.

He turns. Looks back inland, where a mushroom cloud has tattooed itself against the sky, permanently unfurled; he can't remember when the explosion happened, but he knows he has been walking ever since. He lost his shoes somewhere along the way. The caravan park is gone, and there are no lights to guide him home. No windmill to protect him. Only the beach, and the dust, and the dead crabs, curled up, forever braced for impact.

Pete knows he has been dreaming before he is even fully awake. He sits up, quietly, aware that his pyjamas are soaked through with

sweat. It is a hot night, and Nan forbids open windows at night-time. *Someone could reach in and snatch you away* she says, though Pete is already five feet six.

He peels back the curtain. Outside, the moon is reassuringly bright, and the breeze murmurs against the windbreakers. The low rumble of Grandad's snoring carries down the hall. He presses his hot face against the window, breathes slow; after a few moments his sprinting heart slows to a stroll, and the sweat begins to dry on the back of his neck.

High above, a star falls.

Pete wipes away the breath-fog and peers up. For a long moment nothing happens; the stars stubbornly hold their position, and he thinks he must have imagined it, but then two stars fall almost in unison, and a third, the knowing wink of a distant eye. He thinks of Laika then, exploring the cosmos in her dog-sized spaceship. He thinks about the magic of stories.

The caravan floor creaks like the hull of a ship, but Nan and Grandad are heavy sleepers, and Pete has always been light on his feet. Quietly, he steals down the hall to the room where Beverley sleeps, piled under blankets no matter the weather. Her stuffed dog is on the floor between the narrow twin beds, discarded sometime during the night. "Bev," he whispers, as he steals into the room. He reaches for the dog and stops suddenly, fingers splayed. The drawn curtains are fluttering gently, and the blanket pile is curiously flat.

Pete looks down at the stuffed dog. He is paused mid-motion, unable to continue, unable to rewind. If he remains perfectly still—if he denies the linear progression of time, the mechanism by which the present becomes past and the future, with all its unknowns and variables, becomes the now—then surely he cannot prove that Beverley is not beneath the blankets. If nobody ever pulls back the curtains, then it can never be *known* that the windows are open on the other side. If he just keeps perfectly still…

In the end, it is his own voice that betrays him. Crying out for Nan and Grandad even as his body remains perfectly still, frozen in place over the discarded dog even at the approaching thud of grown-up feet.

vi. cosmic dancer

"She's five years old," Grandad says. "She can't possibly have gone far."

"That depends on how long she's been gone." Nan is not crying, not yet; her eyes are glassy but she bites down on her sadness the way she always does. Neither of them will address the possibility that Beverley might not have wandered off by her own volition. Nan's mythical kidnapper, reaching in through the open window to steal little girls away into the night. They haven't discussed it; it is as though there is an unspoken consensus that to speak of it would lend the idea power, make it real.

Grandad leaves in search of a payphone. Nan paces the perimeter of the caravan, staring desperately out into the distance where rabbits scurry unseen; the dark places beneath caravans and under bridges, in the depths of ditches where there surely cannot be monsters, not with the talismanic windmill so close by. Pete's comprehension of human evil is grand in scale: world wars and mutually assured destruction, children dying with empty bellies and bones sharp as razors. Child-snatchers still exist on the periphery between fiction and reality; a kind of storybook evil, like hungry trolls lurking under bridges. It is easier for Pete to imagine Beverley burnt to ashes in the wake of a nuclear bomb than in the back of a stranger's car, disappearing into the night.

"Stay inside, Pete," Nan says. He can tell she's upset because she's lighting up her third cigarette in the space of twenty minutes, smoking each one down to her fingers. "Hold the fort, will you? There's a good boy."

At any other time he might roll his eyes, proclaim loudly that he is not a *boy* anymore, but somehow it doesn't seem so important. He watches Nan's implacable pacing for a moment longer before retreating into the stuffy heat of the caravan. Soon, Grandad will be back, and the police will be on their way, and even though it's the dead of night they will rally the neighbours and comb the fields and ditches until Beverley is found. And they *will* find her.

He sits on Beverley's bed, staring out of the window. The moon is as bright as ever, though the meteor shower seems to have finished;

the stars are static now, indifferent to the cosmos as distant suns are surely entitled to be. He picks Beverley's dog up off the floor, placing it with care on her pillow. On the nightstand between the two beds is a strictly curated exhibit of her best and finest treasures; a white seagull feather, a mottled pebble shaped vaguely like a heart, a blue glass marble. The Jupiter stone is nowhere to be seen.

Pete scrabbles on the floor, beneath the beds. Lifts the duvet, searches inside the pillowcase. Beverley keeps her favourite treasures with her all the time, whether sleeping or eating or combing the beach for new wonders, and though Beverley is famously single-minded, Pete does not believe she would have had time to select the stone from the heart of her exhibit—so carefully that all her other treasures remain perfectly in place—if she truly had been snatched through an open window.

He scoops up the stuffed dog and heads out onto the veranda. Nan is on the other side of the caravan, but she moves fast, and so must he. Down the steps in a single jump, barefoot on grass already wet with dew. He sprints towards the neighbour's caravan, ducks left; there are now two structures between him and Nan. The soles of his feet flash white in the dark like rabbit tails. His sweat-damp pyjamas catch the night breeze rolling in from the sea, chilling the skin beneath. Ahead, the silent road. The route to the beach is instinctive, a reflex instilled over the years: *left at the green-striped caravan, over the troll bridge*—checking the ditch beneath, no sign of Beverley—*across the road, turn right at the sky blue caravan, keep going until you reach the pool…*

The indoor swimming pool overlooks the seafront. During the day it is alive with loud, excitable children, harried parents steering them past the ice-cream kiosk; the rich, hot-fat smell of freshly fried doughnuts and the sharp undercurrent of pool chlorine. Now it is ghostly in its emptiness, a dark and silent building staring out to sea. He looks out over the beach, at the black water glossy with moonlight. It looks cold, and very deep. It looks like it could swallow a little girl entire.

His heart crawls up into his throat as he steps out onto the pebbles. He walks gingerly; sharp little stones gnaw at the arches of his feet. The tide is high, and the beach is a pale, narrow strip. He

squints out into the night, searching; he opens his mouth to call out but the words are stuck. Her name is a magic word, and he does not know whether uttering it will incite tragedy.

There, in the near distance, sitting at the water's edge. She turns to look at him, bedraggled hair plastered to her grey face, wide deer-eyes. Her lips are purple, teeth chattering; her nightdress is soaked through. She is so small. Pete presses the stuffed dog into her shivering arms, hoping she might leach some warmth from it. "What on earth have you been doing?"

"I saw a spaceship." Each word is truncated by the vicious chattering of her teeth. In spite of her pitiful state she is buzzing with excitement. She points out to sea. "It landed in the water. It was a tiny little spaceship."

"You must have seen a shooting star," Pete says. He knows he has to get her home somehow. It's not far, but she's shivering so violently he's not sure she'll even be able to stand. "There was a meteor shower. Did you see it?"

She shakes her head. "It wasn't like the other stars. It came all the way down. It had wings sticking out, and a window, and there was smoke coming out of it like Grandad's car. It *wasn't* a star, Pete. It was a tiny spaceship, just big enough for a dog to fit inside. Like Laika's one in the story."

He stares at her for a moment. She is consumed with an impossible certainty, the way only a child can be. But a *spaceship,* of all things? She must have been sleepwalking, he realises. She must have dreamed the entire thing and woke up wet and shivering on a stony beach. Gently, he wraps his arms around her, scoops her up; her skin is shockingly cold. "Why did you go into the water?" he asks, lifting her up. "Do you remember?"

"Yes." Exasperated; she knows when she is being patronised. "I wanted to see if anybody was inside the spaceship. But the water was deep, and I can't swim. Pete, do you think Laika can swim?"

"Oh, definitely. All space dogs learn how to swim. It's part of their training." He takes a few slow steps; the shingle is excruciating, and Pete's legs are already beginning to buckle under Beverley's weight. She clings to him, cold and heavy as a stone. This is his fault, he realises.

Guilt sours his stomach. He has sown the seeds of this hallucination and watched with misguided joy as it grew roots in Beverley's young brain, feeding off her vivid imagination. He should end the charade now. He should tell her that a story is just a story, and that she can't have seen what she thinks she's seen. That running off in search of imaginary space-dogs and almost ending up drowned is a stupid thing to do. He should tell her that Laika is probably long dead, and her withered, forgotten little body is probably so much space debris, entombed inside an old tin can, endlessly orbiting some minor star a long way from home.

He sets her down on a bench outside the swimming pool. He peels off his pyjama shirt, wraps her shivering little body in thin fabric. He thinks his feet might be bleeding. "Stay here," he says, "no matter what happens. All right?"

She nods vaguely, staring out to sea, holding her stuffed dog tightly to her chest. Watching the waves for motion. Waiting for Laika to surface.

vii. little wing

Nan and Grandad decide not to tell Mum about Beverley's adventure. Pete overhears them whispering in the narrow kitchen, busying themselves making Beverley hot milk and honey, filling up hot water bottles to bring the colour back to her skin.

"…Janice is already right on the edge," Nan says. There comes the tinny clink of spoon against mug, an almost aggressive stirring. "This is supposed to be a relaxing break from worrying about the kids. If she finds out what happened…"

"It was an accident," Grandad replies. He sounds tired; not just in his body, Pete thinks, but in his heart too. "And besides. Nothing bad happened, in the end. I think Janice is tougher than you give her credit for."

Pete can almost hear Nan tightly purse her lips, that severe expression she pulls when she's biting back a harsh rebuke. "She's fragile, Brian. I'm amazed she's functioning at all. She's got enough

on her plate what with Peter's *problems.* She doesn't need Beverley to worry about on top of everything else."

Pete withdraws, stung. Quietly, he slips back into bed, careful not to disturb Beverley, curled up in the other bed, away from the window. She is awake, though; her gaze is frank as he settles back, draws the blanket up over his chest.

"Nobody believes me," she says, a little forlorn.

"You can't blame them, really," Pete replies, quiet, so that Nan and Grandad won't know he's been listening. "You scared them a lot. They thought you'd been snatched away through the window."

Her eyes darken. "You don't believe me."

"I do! I do believe you." Dangerous ground again. How far is too far? When is he supposed to shatter the illusion? He doesn't want to be the one to rob Beverley of joy. He doesn't want her to end up like him, burdened every day by the weight of the truth, and without so much as a comforting lie to temporarily ease the pressure. But the line between illusion and delusion is growing frighteningly thin. "I was worried too," he says, turning onto his side. The bedroom feels much too small with them both in it, but Beverley refuses to sleep in with Nan or Grandad because they both snore. "Imagine how sad Mum would be if you got washed out to sea."

"Mum's *always* sad." Sulky. She doesn't seem to be suffering much for her ordeal; the colour is already beginning to return to her cheeks, and her towel-dried hair is springy and wild again. "So are you. You're always worried, all of the time. It's boring."

"There's a lot to be worried about." Pete presses his face into the pillow. He wonders if he should repeat his bedtime ritual. Does this count as a second bedtime? Isn't once per night enough? He has never encountered this scenario; he has not prepared for it, and the uncertainty of it is like a band pulled tight around his chest.

Beverley sits up. "You mustn't tell Nanny or Grandad, okay?"

"About what?" Pete mumbles into the pillow.

"My special treasure." She reaches into the pocket of her dressing gown. Whatever she has found is small enough to fit into her enclosed fist. He holds out his hand. Something cold and smooth falls into his

palm. "I lost my Jupiter stone in the sea. I tried to look for it, but I found this instead."

Pete rolls onto his front. He turns the object over with one forefinger; it is a small, bone-shaped scrap of metal, like a keyring, except the ring is absent. There is something engraved on the front. A foreign script, one he does not recognise: Кудрявка. It looks like a dog's name tag, he realises, with growing disbelief. He stares at it for a long moment, running his thumb along the inscription as though he might be able to absorb the meaning through his skin.

"What does it say?" Beverley asks.

"All right then, little miss." Nan bustles into the tiny room, armed with a blue fluffy hot water bottle and a steaming mug. Pete tucks the name tag into his palm, slips his hands beneath the pillow. "Time for bed. And I do mean it this time. Drink up."

Beverley wrinkles her nose. "It's too hot, Nanny."

"It only *feels* too hot because you're a little block of ice. Come on." She watches with satisfaction as Beverley swallows the drink down in four long gulps. She looks expectantly up at Nan; a thin rim of milk lines the delicate bow of her upper lip. "Good girl. All right, are we ready to say goodnight?"

"Goodnight sea," Beverley begins, as Nan tucks the hot water bottle in beside her. "Goodnight stars."

Goodnight rabbits, Pete mouths silently. *Goodnight windmill. Thank you for keeping all the monsters away.* Thumb pressed against the shallow ridges of the strange, alien inscription, notebook forgotten, if only for now. *See you when the sun comes up.*

viii. london calling

Two weeks ago, on the drive down, all Pete wanted was to go back home. And now, sitting on the sea wall at dusk, watching the silvery tide come in, he realises, somewhat belatedly, that he likes it better here. Would rather stay, if he could, even though they don't have a television.

He has one more day. He thinks of home the way he thinks of school: a dull, grey place in which he is scarcely aware of the passage of time, the content of his days. School requires a focus he cannot maintain. At home he feels like he is drifting, buoyed by Mum's presence and fragile moods. At home he has Beverley, and she anchors him to reality with her insistence upon schedule: six-thirty is dinner time, seven-thirty is story time, eight-o'clock is brush-teeth-and-bedtime, and if Mum is at work, or in one of her catatonic reveries, it is down to Pete to provide.

He kicks at the shingle with the toe of his shoe. The pebbles underneath are wet and glistening. Here, he has a degree of freedom; he is trusted to come and go as he pleases, at least within the confines of the caravan park, and he is beholden to nobody's schedule. Nan and Grandad take care of him in a way he has grown unused to. He is fed, entertained, spoken with, and if his fears present to them as oversensitivity—a trait unbecoming of a thirteen year old boy—his grandparents at least make some effort to talk about the things that scare him. To convince him, unsuccessfully, that he has nothing to be afraid of.

Beverley is already in bed when he returns, though it is not quite dark yet. She has shown no ill effects from her adventure; all day she has been as bright and energetic as ever, making daisy chains as they trailed around the miniature golf course and insisting that Nan and Grandad wear them. He'd taken Grandad aside on the way back while Beverley was busy with Nan, reciting all the names of the wildflowers growing along the verge. "Look what I found on the beach," he'd said, showing Grandad the name tag.

Grandad had squinted a little, puzzling out the individual letters of the inscription. "What a strange thing to find," he'd said, turning it over in his hand. "Looks like Russian to me. Wonder who it belonged to? Don't suppose there are many Russians out this way. Well, maybe I'm wrong." He'd smiled, inclined his head knowingly towards Beverley, now sporting a crest of buttercups like a tiara. "Don't let you-know-who see it. You know how much of a little magpie she can be."

Pete had felt a small thrill in his heart—*Russian,* he'd thought, and had been unable to suppress a smile as he slipped the tag back

in his pocket. "Maybe I'll let her have it," he'd said, affecting a shrug. "I've got no use for it anyway."

"I know you're only pretending to be asleep," Pete says, perching on the end of her bed. At the other end of the caravan, Nan and Grandad are listening to some kind of radio drama; they won't hear the two of them talking. "Don't you want to know what Grandad said about the name tag?"

A rustle of bed sheets. Beverley turns to face him; she looks resolutely un-sleepy, as though she has been waiting patiently for him to pick his moment. "Is it hers?" she asks.

"I don't know. Grandad can't read Russian, and neither can I."

She sits up. "But if the writing is from Russia then it *must* belong to Laika!" The dog tag is now nestled in the centre of the bedside table, which she has cheerfully annexed, consigning Pete's Walkman to the end of his bed. The rest of her favoured treasures form a perimeter around her chosen specimen. "Why did she come back, Pete? Do you think she found somewhere safe for us to live?"

"Well," Pete says, reclining on the bed. "Laika spent a very long time in space. Such a long time that she was running out of food and water, and she'd listened to all of her tapes a hundred times. And still, she hadn't found the right planet for people to live on. But the worst thing was that she felt lonely. It had been a very long time since anybody had spoken to her, or stroked her head, or called her a good girl. She couldn't even remember what any of those things felt like any more.

"One day, after visiting five terrible planets in a row, Laika got into her bed and she lay there for a very long time. It felt like everything was hopeless. All the people at home had probably forgotten all about her by now, and the people who remembered her must have thought she'd failed in her mission. She thought about things for a while, and then she counted what was left of her food and water. And although she didn't have very much, she realised that she had enough to get home.

"But Laika was worried, then, because she had promised the Russian President that she would find them all a new planet to live on. How would he feel if she came back with nothing? How would

Laika explain to him that there was nowhere else in the universe for them to go? Surely he would be very upset, and all the people would be too, because they had put all of their hope and trust in her."

"But she tried her best, didn't she?" Beverley interjects. "Mummy says that if you try your best, nobody can be cross with you."

"She did try her best. She worked very hard and travelled a very long way. And then, after a few days of thinking, Laika decided what she would tell the Russian President. She would tell him that she had flown all around the universe, and that she had seen hundreds and hundreds of planets. And she would tell him that they had to do their best to keep Earth a safe place to live, because no planet in the universe was as good as Earth. They would have to stop fighting each other, because if they blew the world up there would be nobody left to remember why they had been fighting in the first place."

"And that would be very silly," Beverley finishes, quite solemn.

"Yes, it would." He barely suppresses the smile in time; she will only interpret it as not being taken seriously, and her wrath will be biblical. Then: "Don't go off by yourself any more, okay Bev? I'd be really sad if anything happened to you."

"Even more sad than normal?"

"Yes."

Her face splits in a yawn. "All right, I won't" she says, airily dismissive as she snuggles back under her blanket. A squirrel-tail tuft of hair on the pillow is all that's left to prove she's really there. "Anyway, I don't have time for adventures right now. I've got too many important things to do."

"Of course." He reaches into his bag, all packed up on the end of the bed. His notebook is in the front pocket; he pulls it out, tucks it under his arm and gets up, casting a glance down at the name tag: Кудрявка. How does the word sound, spoken aloud? What does it mean? He won't allow himself to believe it might belong to Laika; it's just a silly story, a tale he's woven for Beverley's sake, and the real Laika, the little dog the Russians sent into space so many years ago, can't possibly have survived for so long. It's probably from a Russian satellite, he tells himself, taking his notebook out onto the veranda, where the light has begun to wane and the crickets are whirring in

the dry grass. That must have been what Beverley saw crashing into the water. Just boring old space junk plummeting back down to the Earth that created it.

ix. waterloo sunset

Pete's anxiety dreams and panicked fantasies depict the coming nuclear war as a grand and hellish conflagration; wide, screaming mouths and melting flesh, dust-choked skies, buildings crumbling like sandcastles. He dreams of blood in the streets, the charred and stinking dead. They never make it to the shelter in time.

It's sometime in the early hours when Grandad comes into the bedroom, dressed in his pyjamas and outdoor coat. Pete blinks through sleep-gritty eyes, head muzzy with unfinished dreams. Grandad's face is the grey of old, faded newsprint.

"I'm afraid there's been some bad news," he says.

In years to come Pete will look back on this moment—perfectly preserved, as though kept under glass for the intervening decades—and he will replay again and again the look of utter contrition on his grandad's face, the way his shoulders slump under the weight of his confession. The words, so polite, so apologetic, as though it were nothing but an avoidable inconvenience: *I'm afraid there's been some bad news.*

"There's been an incident," Grandad says. "Down in London, there…well. There's been a bit of trouble. We won't be able to go back for a little while." His eyes are strange and glassy, and suddenly Pete realises that something is badly amiss. Something terrible has happened while he has been sleeping. "Still. It'll be like an extra-long holiday, won't it? No messing about with school or anything…"

Beverley is stirring now, grumbling loudly at having been disturbed. "But I *like* school, Grandad," she mutters, rubbing fretfully at her eyes. "All my friends are there, and Miss Okafor, and the goldfish…"

"What's happened, Grandad?" Pete asks. His stomach feels like a clenched fist. "Is Mum okay?"

Grandad is silent for a few seconds, ruminating over his answer, and in this moment Pete knows that they'll never be able to go home again. He knows because he has known that this would happen for the past two years. There is no sudden sense of crushing despair as he looks into his grandad's eyes and sees the tears gathering there, though they will never spill over; there is only a strange weightlessness, as though his body has temporarily ceased to exist, and all that is left of him is the tight knot of his stomach floating disembodied. And it occurs to him that in all of his terrified fantasies, all of his nightmares, he has never once imagined that he might sleep through a nuclear bomb.

"We haven't heard from her yet," Grandad says. "There's not much coming out of London at the moment. They said on the radio that it might be days before communications are up and running again. So for now, we have to sit tight and wait for news. All right?" His voice is strange and reedy. "We're perfectly safe here. The winds are blowing away from us, so we're in no danger. Me and Nan, we've got everything under control. So don't you kids worry, eh?" Getting to his feet now, and Pete can see that his slippers are coated in mud, damp with dew, and his hands are trembling a little as he fishes in his coat pocket for his cigarettes. "Everything's fine," he mumbles. There's the sound of the door opening, and the creak of the veranda as he steps outside, and then there is quiet. In the distance, there comes the sound of cars starting up, and of hushed conversations on the lawn. Somewhere, someone is quietly sobbing. Pete had always thought the end of the world would be a lot louder.

"I want to go home," Beverley says, strident, but there's a quiver to her voice. "I want to see Mummy."

He looks at her, huddled in the bedclothes. She is so unlike him, with her russet skin and her dark, intelligent eyes; she is so like the father Beverley never got to meet. But she is still his baby sister. He understands, as much as he is capable of understanding anything right now, that it is his job to protect her from everything that is to come. That all the surrogate parenting he has done over the last few years have been in quiet preparation for a moment like this. And all of a sudden he understands that he can't do it. There is an unbearable pressure at his core, and his entire body is as taut as a drumskin; it feels

as though he exists solely as a singular point of tension, a plucked string vibrating a high, screaming note. He can't care for Beverley. He can't even care for himself.

"Home isn't there anymore," he says. The blood is buzzing in his veins like static. He wants to get up and run. He wants to open his mouth and scream until his lungs give out. The adrenaline tastes sour in the back of his throat. "We can't go back. It's gone. They blew it all up."

She draws in a sharp, wobbly breath. "Will Laika come for us?" she asks. The hope in her eyes is agonising. "And maybe…maybe Laika already went to our house, because she knew the bad thing was going to happen, and maybe she took Mummy with her and they're on their way…"

"Laika's dead." He doesn't mean for the words to come out, but they do, and suddenly he can't stop them; he is a cracked dam and the words are water, tumbling uncontrollably from his open mouth. "Laika died before you were even born and she's never coming home. She was never a hero or an explorer or an astronaut, she was just a stupid dog. She's not coming to save us, or our house, or Mum because Laika is *dead*."

She looks utterly stricken. Her hands clutch tightly at her blanket, holding it to her chin. "You shouldn't lie, Peter, it's bad to tell lies, and anyway she *isn't* dead, I saw her spaceship and I even have her *nametag*…"

"This?" He grabs the nametag with one clumsy fist, scattering the rest of her treasures to the floor with a sweep of his arm. She shrinks back against the wall. "You don't even know what it says, Beverley. You're five. You don't know anything. You didn't see a bloody spaceship because Laika is dead. That's the real truth. Everything else was just a stupid story. I made it all up."

There is a long moment in which nobody moves, or speaks, and the only sound is the harsh rasp of Pete's breathing, the only motion the rapid rise and fall of his chest. And then Beverley bursts into tears. The sound of it is like being plunged into cold, deep water: the sudden, awful sensation of having made a terrible mistake. She pulls her knees to her chest; her face crumples and contorts until she

barely even resembles Beverley anymore, so rarely does she cry. Each sob seems wrenched from somewhere deep inside of her; a well of sorrow that Pete had never realised could exist inside someone so small, so young.

He exhales. Unclenches his fists. The nametag has left an angry red imprint in the thin skin of his palm. This is what happens, he thinks, when you take the magic away. This is what happens when a child sees the world—*really* sees it—for the first time.

"I'm sorry," he says, quietly now. He traces the shapes imprinted into his palm with his finger; ghostly letters embossed in flesh. "I was being spiteful. I'm sorry, Bev. Forget I said anything, okay?"

She looks up at him, pink-rimmed eyes large and reproachful, speaking through wet hiccups. "You said we can't go home anymore. You said horrible things and then you said they were *true.*"

"I know. I know I did. I'm sorry."

"I don't want them to be true, Pete." She looks at him as though he has the power to change everything back to the way it was, and she resents him for his inaction. Somehow, this is the worst thing of all. Worse than the bomb, worse than being *right*. Worse than losing everything. "I wish you were telling lies."

There is a fullness in his throat, a heat gathering behind his eyes. "You have to be brave now," he says, swallowing hard. "Just like Laika, do you remember? In the story I told you? She knew she wouldn't be able to go home for a long time, but she was a brave dog, and she didn't cry. You have to be like Laika now, and when Mum comes, I'll be able to tell her all about how brave you were."

"When Mummy comes?" Beverley says.

He gives her a thin smile. His face feels tight, as though his skin has been stapled on. The truth is a barbed, awful thing, stuck tight in his chest; he doesn't want to think about the truth because he's afraid it will drive him mad. The lie is sweet, and will keep Beverley going for a while, but he knows he cannot sustain it. He opts, instead, for silence.

"I wish Laika wasn't dead. I wish she would come and take us away," Beverley says, sinking back into bed, the covers pulled up to her nose. She sniffles miserably; her puffy eyelids are beginning to droop. He knows she'll sleep, but she won't sleep peacefully. He slips

out of bed, kneels by his bag, packed and ready for their aborted departure tomorrow. He sifts through his tapes until he finds the one he's looking for.

"Here," he says, sliding the tape into his Walkman. He slips the headphones over Beverley's head; they're too big, but when she lays her head on the pillow they sit neatly beside her ears, and she clasps her hands to her face to hold them in place. "Remember Mum singing this to you in the car on the way back from Bournemouth? And you told her to stop because her singing made your ears sad?"

The Walkman is his constant, his comfort blanket, his unbreakable link to the lucid, smiling mother he remembers from years ago; giving it away, even for the night, is like reaching in and giving away some soft, vital part of himself. And maybe it won't fix the damage he's done—maybe that *can't* be fixed—but Beverley still needs it more than he does. She drifts off to the sound of Supertramp, the words bleeding out softly from the headphones.

He slips quietly out of bed. Takes his notebook from the front pocket of his bag, turning it over in his hands. Nan and Grandad are huddled on the sofa in the living room, listening intently to the radio. They must notice the tinny thud of the back door opening and closing but they make no attempt to stop him. Perhaps they have faith in his sensibility. Perhaps they've been struck numb and nothing really matters to them anymore.

Barefoot, he passes like a windblown ghost, slipping unseen past people gathered on verandas and on the grass, deep in shocked conversation despite the hour. He stares up into the darkened caravans and wonders if they are empty; if their occupants are already on the motorway, hoping to find their homes intact and their loved ones safe. Perhaps they are sleeping soundly, blissfully unaware of the monumental way in which the world has suddenly changed.

There is nobody on the beach. There is a faint blue glow on the horizon. Despite everything, the sun persists in rising. It seems wrong to him. Crass, somehow; surely even the universe itself ought to take pause, if only for a short while, to reflect upon the stupidity of mankind, and ask how a species so rich in intelligence could be so destitute in empathy. He opens his notebook, holding it aloft. The

words are as intimately familiar to him as any believer's Bible, and yet staring at them now is like deciphering Urdu, or Mandarin; his own script is completely alien to him. On bare feet he approaches the sea. He supposes it might turn to poison soon, what with the fallout and all. A still image from his dream flashes briefly before his eyes: the shore littered with thousands of dead crabs, and around him, the perfect silence of a nuclear winter.

He does not run his thumb down the first page the way he has hundreds of times before. He does not look at the words, though he can see them, in his mind's eye, down to the smudges of ink in the margin. They have betrayed him, these words. He has followed the ritual to the letter, kept his end of the bargain, and all for nothing. He tears the page out, crumples it in his hand. He barely feels the stones underfoot as he walks down to the water's edge. The water engulfs his feet up to the ankles, a sudden cold shock; he tries to imagine Beverley out here, chilled to the bone, wading into the water in search of Laika, and that spurs him onwards, into the water until the pebbles underfoot turn to velvety silt and the shock of cold brine against his abdomen momentarily steals the breath from his lungs. He wonders, as he savours the sensation of emptiness in his chest, if this is how Mum felt at the end. Did the searing heat of the explosion take her breath away? Did she have time to feel the flesh melt from her bones? Did she think of her children at all before she died?

One by one, torn pages flutter like confetti, settling briefly on the surface of the water before they sink. On and on until the water is white with shreds of paper, and the sun is peering tentatively over the lip of the horizon, small and white. He has been a fool. There is no ritual powerful enough to stop the world.

x. breathing

He is thirty-two years old, and the sharp Helsinki winter is starting to give way to spring. The streets are paved with smooth, glassy ice and his progress along the marina is slow, one careful foot at a time; he is already bruised from previous ventures. Out in the marina, the boats

are sealed in place by a layer of thick white ice; thin cracks web the surface like dark blue veins. He has been here for two days, and he finds the short, sparkling days and long, chilly nights a strange comfort. He does not sleep well, and the city is so beautiful in the dark.

His walk takes him past the cathedral, resplendent against the brilliant winter sky, and up onto Yliopistonkatu, where his hotel sits inconspicuously beside the Metro station, and there is a McDonald's where the staff mostly speak English and the food tastes familiar. The hotel is small and pleasantly empty, which is a relief after the bustle and noise of the conference, and his sole companion on the trip—Irina, a tall, taciturn Ukrainian working towards a PhD in contemporary Soviet literature—is more concerned with practising her presentation endlessly in front of the mirror than with seeing anything at all of Helsinki. He waves a brief 'hello' to the receptionist, who is plump and pretty and resembles, in passing, one of those white cartoon hippo creatures the Finns seem so fond of. She offers the barest of acknowledgements, which, he has come to realise, is quite a sociable gesture from a Finn.

The room is barely large enough to fit both him and the furniture. He shucks off his coat and shoes and sits on the edge of his bed, rummaging in his bag for the reading he has brought with him: a student's thesis on the redundancy of dystopian fiction in post-nuclear Britain. It is buried beneath a pile of clothes and toiletries. He tips the entire bag out onto the bed, sorting through the socks and shampoo bottles. In among a pile of poorly-folded shirts something small and shiny catches his eye. He takes it between his thumb and forefinger, holds it up to the light, squinting; he has inherited his mother's poor eyesight, and it will only get worse as he ages.

Кудрявка

He sits on the bed, holding it in his palm, and stares at it for a long time. There are memories that have been lost to him in the passage of time; some accidental, some pushed deliberately away and buried deep, where they can't hurt him. Others still have become collateral damage in his selective remembrance of the past, the careful editing he has done to maintain a veneer of sanity. This, he realises, was one of them.

In a sudden and uncharacteristic fit of decisiveness he gets up and walks barefoot to the room three doors down where he knows he will find Irina. She answers when he knocks; she looks dishevelled, as though she has not slept much, and her skin is sallow from the lack of sunlight.

"Sorry to disturb you, Irina, but I was wondering. Do you happen to speak Russian?"

She regards him with pale, calm eyes. "It's my mother tongue," she says. Her accent is both harsh and oddly melodious; it's pleasant to listen to her talk at length. "Why do you ask?"

He hands her the tag. She is impassive as she runs her eyes across the inscription. "What does this say?" he asks.

"Kudryavka." The letters are just as alien spoken aloud, the syllables rolling smoothly into one another. "It sounds like a dog's name, I think. It means 'little curly.' It's a cute name." She hands it back over. "Did he belong to someone you know?"

"My sister found it on a beach years ago, when we were kids. I always wondered what it said. Thanks, Irina."

"You'll be at my presentation this afternoon, yes?" It's almost a command, but there is uncertainty about her face, a frown at the corners of her mouth, as though she's afraid nobody will turn up, and she will be addressing an empty room. It reminds him of Beverley, and the stubborn resolve she wears to ward off her doubts. It's been a long time since he last saw her face.

"Of course." He knows how she feels; he was in her shoes only a few years ago. "Don't worry. You've practised so much you can do this in your sleep. You're going to do fine."

"Thank you, Peter." And then, as he turns to leave: "They must have been thinking of the space dog."

He stops in his tracks. "Sorry?"

"Do you know the story? The dog they sent into space?" She shakes her head. "Ah. It was a long time ago, I suppose."

"Are you talking about Laika?"

She is momentarily disarmed; her smile is perhaps the first genuine smile she's ever shown him. "Everyone calls her Laika because that's what the newspapers called her. I suppose that's the

closest thing she had to a proper name. You probably wouldn't know about all the other names they called her. The scientists, I mean. They called her Zhuchka and Limonchik, and they called her Kudryavka. So perhaps your Kudryavka belonged to someone who was a fan of hers. Maybe it was a tribute."

He tries to speak, but his tongue is stuck to the roof of his mouth. He swallows; his throat is very dry. "Do you know what happened to her in the end?"

"She died," Irina says, a little regretfully. "They said she died a week after the launch, but that isn't true. It took only hours. The capsule overheated, and that was that. Poor little thing died terrified and alone. You know the worst thing is, they knew all along that she wasn't going to survive. The day before they sent her up, one of the scientists took her home with him so that his children could play with her. He thought she should have one day of happiness before she died." She clucks her tongue. "They should never have done that to an animal. How could she have understood? She probably only wanted to make them happy."

"I wonder if it was worth it?" he says, mostly to himself.

Her smile is grim this time. "Few things that end in premature death are worth it," she says.

In his hotel room, he picks up the phone and dials a number he remembers as well as his own name, though he hasn't dialled it in at least a year. His pulse quickens with latent anxiety as the phone rings; the long, drawn-out pauses of the international dialling tone only serve to weaken his resolve. When she answers—hesitant, wary of this strange foreign number—he's relieved to realise her voice still sounds like home.

"Hey Beverley. It's me, Pete."

A pause. Then: "…Pete? This isn't your number. Where on earth are you calling from?" Over the years, her London accent has eroded, smoothed out at the edges like pebbles at the mouth of the ocean. She has been living in America for four years, and with her grandparents

in Trinidad for seven years before that, and the combined influence has lent her a chimera of an accent; soft Caribbean rhoticity and long, drawn out American vowels and, incongruous, the harsh glottal stops of her previous life.

"I'm in Helsinki for an academic conference."

"Sounds like a wild time." He can hear the wry smile in her voice. It's always been easy for her to pick up where they left off. There is a casual ease to all her relationships; she floats in and out like driftwood, returning only when the tide brings her back. She understands the impermanence of everything. It colours everything she does.

"You know me," he says. "The party never stops."

"So what's the scoop? Who's been smuggling baggies of coke in the hollowed-out pages of fake first editions? Which crusty old professor is having an illicit affair with his young, nubile student? Give me the goods, Pete."

"Bev, do you remember when we were kids, and you said you saw a spaceship crash into the sea?"

She is quiet for a long moment. "That was a long time ago, wasn't it?" she asks, hesitant. "I must have been very young. I can barely remember anything from back then. A spaceship? Did I really say that?"

"A spaceship small enough for a dog to fit inside." He looks down at the tag in his hand. Kudryavka. "We were at the caravan. You went into the sea to find it. It was about three in the morning."

"A dog-sized spaceship?" She sounds equally bemused and delighted, as though he is talking about the antics of some other child, in some other place. "And I went into the sea? How come I didn't drown? Jesus. I can't remember any of that. I was such a weird kid. Didn't I drive you nuts?"

"You weren't that bad," he says, smiling. "You just had a big imagination."

"I guess I did." Another pause. He can hear the low roar of Chicago traffic outside her window, muted, like a seashell held up to the ear. She always did miss the city. "What made you remember that all of a sudden, anyway?"

"It's a long story," he says.

"I've got time," she replies.

The nametag rests in his palm. It is a piece of their history, symbolic of who they were before, in more innocent times. There is an entire story contained within those letters, those strange, rolling syllables; the story of Laika, the little dog who became a hero, and of a frightened boy trying to protect his sister from a changing world. It's different now, though. This time, he knows how the story ends.

He looks at his watch. Irina's presentation is in just over an hour. There is time. He puts the nametag on the bedside table, surrounded by the paraphernalia of his trip: bright, freshly-minted coins, used Metro tickets, wrappers from sweets whose names he can't pronounce, and which taste the way tar smells. His own strange treasures.

There is so little magic left in the world. There are no windmills with the power to ward off monsters, no trolls hiding under the bridges, no special rituals to ward off disaster. London lies shattered, and there is no magic in the world powerful enough to put it all back together again. But perhaps there is still room enough for a tiny spaceship. One small enough for a dog to fit inside.

"All right," he says, at last. "Once upon a time, there was a dog called Laika."

STRANGE AS ANGELS

Frankie drives with the window down and a cigarette between her lips, the taste of autumn night and nicotine crisp in the back of her throat. The radio is tuned to one of those weird nonsense-chatter stations that only seems to exist out here in the sticks. She drives one-handed, cruising at a steady speed down pitch-black country lanes. Thick trees line the road on either side, a ragged cleft of dark sky running between them like an old scar. No stars out tonight.

Jimmy is slumped in the passenger seat, face pressed hard against the window. Condensation blooms from his open mouth. It's his car. He ought to be driving, but he's so appallingly wasted he can't even put one foot in front of the other, let alone man a vehicle. She had anticipated this outcome; she's downed just enough vodka and lime to quell her nerves, and a little more for luck.

Jimmy had driven on the way up. It had been an exercise in florid catastrophizing, and Jimmy had laughed at the way she shrank into her seat every time a car came in the opposite direction down the narrow lane. "I'm not drunk enough for this," she'd muttered. The woods had seemed sinister then, dark and foreboding, the kind of place monsters might lurk. But drunkenness has a way of lending a certain fuzzy-edged perspective to things, and it seems to Frankie now that the trees are protecting them somehow. That it's the world beyond them which is sinister.

She flicks ash out of the window.

"Are there wolves in Sussex?" Jimmy asks.

Frankie looks across. Jimmy's eyes are grave and bleary, his body contorted into an improbable knot of limbs and seatbelt. She's used

to this. Sometimes, when the alignment of strange chemicals in his bloodstream is just right, his dreams bleed out into his perception of the world, and he can't quite find the divide between reality and hallucination.

"Wolves?" A thick plume of cigarette smoke catches on the breeze, spilling out into the night. She watches it dissipate in the rear-view mirror. "There aren't any wolves anywhere in England, I don't think. Only in zoos."

"Oh good." Jimmy smiles. His teeth are crooked, like old piano keys. He leans forward, slow and deliberate; he reaches a single finger to the radio panel, missing the 'change station' button by inches. "Why are we listening to the shipping forecast?"

She likes him better like this. It's a perverse thing to think, that the accumulative effect of booze and coke and weed improves him as a person, but it does. He's quieter, more amenable. Less inclined to pick at the frayed edges of whatever screwed-up kind of friendship this is. Less inclined to push for more. "I've not been listening. I've been driving. One of us has to be a responsible adult."

"I get to pick the music," Jimmy slurs. "That's the rules. That's the rules of shotgun." He cycles through seven different types of static, briefly discovers, and loses, a station pumping out crackly bossa nova.

There's a sudden spark of motion from the woods. Something pale and quick emerges from the trees, careening through the air towards them. Frankie hits the brakes, but they're moving too fast, and the road is still slick with afternoon rain; tyres yelp as they skid out, car arcing gracefully across the tarmac. She's dimly aware of Jimmy beside her, still cycling through those fucking radio stations even as the car turns a full three-sixty, a whip-crack of motion; something bounces off the windscreen with a hard, wet thump, and she thinks jesus shit, I killed someone.

They come to an abrupt halt ten metres from where she'd hit the brakes. For a long moment she is perfectly still: bloodless fingers wrapped tight around the steering wheel, heart pistoning in the base of her throat, staring at the shape imprinted on the windscreen. The chalk-smear outline of an improbably tiny human being.

Her hands fumble frantically, fighting to open the door, to unlatch the seatbelt. The sweet-sour stench of bourbon-laced vomit rises in a thick wave, and she realises Jimmy has puked all over himself. She stumbles over her own feet as she scrambles out.

The car sits diagonally, front half listing into the ditch at the side of the road. Frankie stumbles back into the road, unsteady, blue-black braids hanging in her eyes. Somehow, Jimmy is already there, crouched in the glare of the headlights. His skin is so white it's almost blue.

He points. There is a small shape at his feet.

"Frankie, come here," he says as she approaches. His smile is lopsided and beatific. "Look what I found."

It's a delicate little mannequin, tiny limbs curled and foetal, skin rice-paper thin. A pair of membranous wings sprout from the nubs of its scapulae, folded up tightly like the petals of a sleeping flower. She slips her fingers beneath it, gentle, afraid it might crumble in her hands.

Tiny black eyes flicker open, regarding her without fear.

"Look Frankie," Jimmy whispers, reverent. "It's an angel."

In the morning her body feels like the aftermath of a street riot, a burnt-out shell smouldering in the cold light of day. Her head is horribly heavy, her spine a too-taut rope, and her hands and knees are crusted with a filth she does not remember accumulating.

Frankie gingerly disentangles herself from Jimmy's arms, her mouth a moue of disgust. The proximity of his skin to hers is almost physically repulsive, the scent of him intrusive. She did not give him permission to enter her bed. They've had this conversation before: he, oscillating wildly between childlike hurt and indignant sulking, she grinding teeth at his inability to accept the sanctity of her personal space. And still, some mornings she finds him, emboldened by chemicals and by her own dead-body stupor, coiled snakelike and overwarm around her.

He has never tried to touch her intimately. Not yet.

She shambles to the bathroom, peeling off last night's clothing as she goes. Her black skin shimmers with glitter-paint; in the dim light she is a galaxy, a broad sweep of faraway stars glimmering in the darkest reaches of space. She smells resolutely terrestrial, though: old sweat, cigarette smoke, damp earth. She does not smell of Jimmy, and for that at least she is grateful.

Frankie perches on the edge of the bath, soaks a flannel in hot water and scrubs her face until her skin shines, passing it cursorily beneath her arms. She shrugs on a clean t-shirt and shorts. Specks of glitter cling stubbornly to her forearms, her clavicle.

Jimmy is awake by the time she gets to the kitchen. He's appropriated one of her oversized band t-shirts. His thin shoulders barely stretch the fabric. He turns, alerted by the soft press of her bare feet on the tiles.

"Holy shit, Frankie." His wide, bloodshot eyes stare out over a mug of milk-pale coffee. His breath smells sour, even at this distance. "I thought I'd dreamed it."

A glass aquarium sits on the kitchen counter. She's had it for years, though she is certifiably incapable of keeping any kind of pet alive for more than two weeks. At the bottom, half-buried in a litter of torn paper towels and newspaper, is a creature the colour of dead skin.

"The angel." She looks up at Jimmy. "We brought it back with us. Don't you remember?"

"No," he says. He presses his fingers to his forehead. "The angel? Jesus, what did you let me take last night?"

Frankie taps a finger on the glass. The angel doesn't even stir. It looks dead. It probably is dead; she can still recall the perfect imprint of its tiny body on the windscreen. "There's a syringe," she says, waving vaguely at Jimmy. "In the medicine box. Fetch it here." While he's searching, she takes the kettle, pours lukewarm water into a glass. She stirs in four teaspoons of sugar. This is what they do with hummingbirds, she tells herself. She can't remember where she might have learned such a thing—watching the Discovery Channel blitzed at 3 a.m., probably—and she isn't sure such knowledge can even be applied to such an unusual animal, but she has to try something.

Gently, she lifts the creature from the fish tank. It is limp, unresponsive, as though it is only a puppet fashioned out of pinkish clay. She feels Jimmy's presence close behind her, a peripheral warmth.

"It's just a doll, Frankie," he says. "We must have been off our faces and seen this in the road, and…"

"You were off your face. I saw it open its eyes. It flew out of the woods, Jimmy." She pries gently at its mouth with her little finger, poising the syringe just above. Its head is a smooth, hairless quail's-egg; its face is a plateau, flat and featureless except for the thin gynaecological slit of its mouth. "I don't know what it is," she says, "but it was alive." She holds it like a baby, feeding individual droplets of sugar-water into its toothless mouth.

Pale pink membranes slide back, revealing sharp black eyes. Its wings flutter and stir, crumpled like loose, elderly skin.

Jimmy shrinks back. "What the bloody hell is it, Frankie?"

In the bright light of morning it seems smaller, more fragile, a pale flesh-puppet. Its eyes meet hers, small and bright and curious. There's a pang somewhere in the vicinity of her heart, startling in its intensity.

"It's beautiful," she says.

On the third day the angel refuses to drink the sugar-water, choosing instead to bury itself in the litter at the bottom of the aquarium. It wriggles and burrows until it disappears beneath the shredded newspaper and kitchen towel. Occasionally, passing by, Frankie catches the gleam of sharp eyes peering out, observing her from the safety of its nest. Once, she holds its gaze for an entire minute; it feels as if it can see through her, into the back of her skull and up, penetrating the thick, tangled bolus of her spinal cord, the soft matter of her brain.

At first, Frankie thinks this must be some new stage in the creature's development. Perhaps it's forming a chrysalis under there, seeking darkness and warmth until it's ready to emerge, bigger and more beautiful. But two days pass, and the angel remains stubbornly entombed, withdrawing further until even its eyes are lost from view.

She's afraid to reach in and touch it, afraid that she might disturb some kind of vital process, but as strange a creature as it is, it surely must need some kind of sustenance.

"It might be dead," Jimmy says, peering into the tank. There's a scattering of chopped fruit in one corner, a heel of bread torn into small chunks. She's tried saucers of milk, crumbled biscuits, sugar cubes. Raw beef mince sitting in a dish for six hours, the smell growing increasingly unbearable in the still warmth of the flat. She's so desperate to see it eat that she has barely slept.

"It's not dead," Frankie replies. Her voice is tinged with an unpleasant hysteria. She nudges Jimmy aside, presses both palms to the side of the tank. She would know if it were dead, she thinks; she would feel it deep inside of her. The certainty of this baseless conviction scares her, a distant kind of fear like the far-off possibility of terminal disease, or lonely destitution. She wills the angel to move but the nest remains stubbornly undisturbed.

A single lamb's kidney is pooled in a dish beside the tank, a glistening mass. Tentatively, Frankie plucks a knife from the wooden block. The blade hovers, reflecting the blue-red sheen. She cannot bring herself to destroy the taut architecture of the renal capsule. She imagines the kidney deflating, a burst water balloon leaking blood.

Jimmy sprawls out across the sofa. He has always been so comfortable in her space. "The internet says it's a hoax," he says, waving his phone at her. "Some kind of animatronic puppet. CGI's a popular theory too."

"You put it on the internet?"

He shrugs. "Well, yeah. I thought maybe someone had seen one before. Might've been able to tell us what it is."

A tremor of useless anger runs through her, petering out at the tips of her clenched fingers. She still can't cut into the kidney. "I don't want anyone else knowing about this," she says. "If someone catches on that the angel is real…"

"I wish you wouldn't keep calling it that," Jimmy mutters.

"You called it that first."

"I was off my face, Frankie, it doesn't count."

She waves the pristine knife at him. "Seriously. Delete whatever you've already posted. I mean it. This is between me and you, all right?"

He sighs. Taps at his phone, demonstrably sulky. "Since when has there ever been a me and you, anyway?" he mutters.

Hot blood creeps up Frankie's neck, burning at her cheeks. She does not know if it is anger or shame that causes the breath to catch momentarily in her chest; this same old debate, one-sided as always, trotted out like a dying horse every time he feels vulnerable. You won't let me touch you. You won't let me love you. Except that isn't quite it. There is an element of longing in him; a yearning for the kind of affection she'll never show. But there's also a proprietary undercurrent, a greedy possessiveness that makes her flesh crawl: you won't touch me. You won't love me. You won't give me what I want. She does not want to be owned by him, touched by him, and she has never feigned otherwise but guilt sours her stomach all the same.

"I was referring to our friendship," she says, forcing neutrality despite the tightness of her jaw. "Because I like to think that maybe the last two years haven't just been about you slowly wearing me down until I give in and sleep with you."

"I don't know how you can even say that," he says.

"Because every time I think we're done with this conversation you go and resurrect it. And I have to ask myself if it's because you think you're going to get a different answer if you just keep being patient." She drives the blade into the kidney, a sharp, sudden motion. The texture is surprisingly firm; the knife glides through with ease. For a split second she imagines it is Jimmy's face. Just a split second. "I don't want that kind of relationship with you, Jimmy. I need you to understand that, because if you don't…" In goes the knife. Thin slices of kidney accumulate, silk-glossy. She gains confidence as she cuts.

"I understand," he says, a little too sharply. He's looking down at his feet, worrying at a hole in his sock with his toenail. Petulant, like her scolding is entirely unprovoked. Like she's in the wrong. "Doesn't mean I have to like it."

Knife slides in, negotiating delicate renal architecture. Paring matter into paper-thin slivers. If she shatters this delicate pretence—the illusion that they are comfortable like this, that Jimmy's obsession doesn't matter—he will leave, and the days will pass in silence, one blending into another, because nobody else has ever been able to tolerate Frankie for long. Her fingers close tight around the knife handle as she peels off a slice so thin the light shines through, illuminating veins like the branches of dead trees. She wants to tell him to go, if he's so unhappy. But he's nitro-glycerine, and if she pushes hard enough he'll explode, destroy everything, burn it all to ashes, and there'll be nothing left but her own voice chiding her endlessly from inside her skull.

The knife slips in her hand, skewing to the left. She registers no pain at all as it cuts into the meat of her thumb. A bead of blood wells up, garnet-dark; it quivers for a moment before collapsing inward, spilling down her palm. She inhales sharply at the sight of it, a wide pink cleft against dark skin.

"Are you all right?" Jimmy asks.

She looks up at him, blank and calm. "It's just a nick," she says, although the pain has started now, and she can tell by the slow, deep pulse of it that she's cut far deeper than she's willing to acknowledge. She searches the counter for the kitchen roll, a towel, anything to staunch the wound. And there, pressed against the side of the tank, is the angel. The cloven nubs of its hands are splayed against the glass, slit-mouth gaping, tongue probing the air the way a snake scents prey. Slowly, she lifts her injured hand. Blood trickles down her wrist, forking off into tributaries. Her eyes never leave the angel as she moves towards it.

"Frankie?"

A trail of droplets stain the counter, a prolonged red ellipsis. The angel scrabbles at the glass as though in desperation, upright on thin limbs which seem ill-designed for movement. She lowers her hand into the tank, expecting it to pounce at her, but it doesn't. A cry emerges from its open mouth, shrill and childlike, the pitiful sound of its hunger. Clumsy fingers grasp the knuckle of her thumb, gently guiding it into the waiting cavern of its mouth. The pain is brief and

intense, but it warms her, flowing to her core like there's something volcanic inside of her.

"Yes," she says, watching the angel suckle with something like pride. "I'm fine."

She buys white mice from the pet shop. They tumble over one another like breaking waves, an undulation of tiny bodies, baby-pink ears. The shop owner eyes her with suspicion, which abates only a little when she explains it's for her snake. This is a small town. Small enough that a black girl with a snake might be considered a talking point, though she can't be sure.

The mice have inquisitive eyes; they are unafraid as Frankie slips her hand in among them, scooping up a warm, squirming bundle. Tiny claws prickle at her palm. The angel emerges from its burrow, all hands and knees, fixated on Frankie's cupped palms as though it can smell what's inside.

With comical care, she deposits the mouse in among the shredded paper. The angel stiffens, limbs poised. A cat ready for the kill. She turns her back, hurrying away before the brittle crunch of small bones comes; the obscene contrast of blood on white fur, conspiring to turn her already sour stomach.

"It's like the Chupacabra," Jimmy says later, retrieving a cluster of desiccated corpses from the bottom of the tank. Tissue paper clings to their diminished bodies, fluttering as Jimmy lifts them out. Frankie peers at one from the corner of her eye, cradled in the cup of Jimmy's palm. It barely resembles a mouse anymore: a chrysalis of skin and bone, an empty ribcage gaping like an open mouth. There is no blood.

"The heart's gone," Jimmy says, prying at the corpse with a fingernail. "Guess we've figured out what it eats."

"How would something like this survive out there?" Frankie asks. "It doesn't look equipped to kill anything. It's got no teeth or claws."

Jimmy shrugs. "Could be a baby," he says. "Maybe it's still dependant on its parents to bring it food. Hey Frankie, maybe you could chew up some mouse hearts? Isn't that what birds do?"

"It's not a bird," she says, faintly nauseated; she can imagine the gristle against her teeth, the wet pop of a heart bursting between her molars. "Besides, it's managing fine by itself. It's eaten four mice since yesterday. It keeps begging. I can't tell if it's hungry or just greedy."

He frowns. "I doubt it's begging, Frankie. It's not a puppy."

What would you know, she thinks, filling a ceramic hamster dish with water. She has not seen the angel since she slipped the mouse into its tank, but the pile of corpses—car-crash messy, limbs stacked beneath limbs—reassures her that it must be all right. And it's true that she can't bring herself to watch it feed, or reach in and touch the bodies it leaves behind, but at four in the morning she'll crawl silently out of bed, eyes adjusting slowly to the bleary monochrome of early dawn, and she'll sit for a while at the kitchen counter, watching it sleep. Sometimes it's awake, and it will pause as she approaches, perhaps judging her in that instant as friend or foe—small body tight as a wound spring, ready to leap for cover—until it recognises her, somehow, by her gait or her build or her scent. And then it relaxes, because it knows she is its benefactor, a surrogate mother whose determination makes up for her lack of knowledge.

It doesn't trust Jimmy yet. Jimmy doesn't talk to it, or sit beside it, marvelling at the intricate architecture of its wings, the way the light illuminates branched veins, rendering skin the colour of peach-flesh. The alien beauty of it is discomfiting, like the bioluminescent lightshow of deep-sea creatures gliding through black ocean trenches. To Jimmy the angel is a curiosity, something to study and to observe from a distance. He is too preoccupied with Frankie's refusal to love him that he cannot see how precious, how special this strange, beautiful monster is.

The angel grows. It goes from a fragile little doll to a hunched prey-bird, limbs slender and taut as cord, outgrowing the warm cradle of Frankie's palm with a rapidness she has seen in no other species. It is as though each heart it devours triggers a growth spurt. Within a week it has outgrown the mice, swallowing the gnarled kernels of their hearts without chewing, though its teeth have finally emerged, jutting jagged and ugly from the bony shelves of its mandibles.

Frankie has Jimmy drive her into Tunbridge Wells so nobody will ask questions when she emerges from the butcher with two kilos of lamb's hearts, so fresh she swears they're still warm. The butcher eyes her briefly, studying her blue-streaked braids, her eyeliner and silver labret stud; he probably thinks she's a weirdo goth engaging in pseudo-vampiric rituals, but he smiles as he takes her money. She clutches the bag to her chest, hoping to disguise its shape, the raw meat odour. Jimmy swears to her it doesn't smell of anything, but she's too paranoid to believe him.

She hurries from the car, up the stairs to the first floor, holding the bag tightly. The angel has grown too big for its tank now; it lives in a second-hand parrot cage Frankie bought off the internet. As she approaches, it presses itself against the bars in silent delight.

"I think it can smell them through the bag," Frankie says, watching it squirm and paw like a dog enraptured at its master's return. She slips her fingers through the bars. Jimmy visibly flinches as the angel leans up, neck extended. "Relax," she says. The angel nuzzles at the pads of her fingers. Its skin is soft as old velvet. "It knows me."

"It's got teeth," Jimmy mutters, eyeing the creature with clear distrust. "It could bite your fingers off."

"It won't," she says. "I told you. It recognises my scent. Sometimes at night it tries to make a nest in my hair. I think it feels safe there. It's actually kind of sweet."

His mouth contorts into a grimace. "You let it sleep in your bed?"

"Well, yeah," she says. "Don't people let their cats and dogs sleep on their beds?"

"This is not a dog, Frankie. It's not even close." He looks over at the angel, now sat with outstretched legs in the corner of its cage, musing over its own toes. "It could hurt you, you know that? Have you seen the way it tears mice open? Three seconds, tops. It's a carnivore, for christ's sake. It drinks blood and eats hearts and you're letting it snuggle in your hair?"

"Don't overreact," she says, weary. "It's never even tried to hurt me. I don't know, maybe it thinks I'm its mother or something…"

"Enough," Jimmy says, shaking his head. He raises a commanding hand. "Just stop it. You sound fucking nuts. I've gone along with this

because I haven't seen you this enthusiastic about anything since you came off your meds. I thought it was good for you but…look, we should've called a newspaper, or the zoo, or the bloody RSPCA because we literally have no idea what we're dealing with. We've discovered a creature maybe no-one else in the world has even seen before, and you're keeping it in a cage and feeding it hearts, and…" he throws up his hands, sighing ostentatiously. "This is weird, Frankie. This is not normal and I should never have gone along with it."

A single syllable escapes her open mouth—"Oh?"—before she snaps it shut, afraid of what else might come pouring out. Everything about him right now is pushing all the wrong buttons: the awful paternalism, the rigid certainty of his posture, as though Frankie is a misguided child who has, through an act of monumental stupidity, let herself down. Because Jimmy knows what's best for her. He always has.

"Come on," he says, conciliatory now. He smiles, but his mouth is strange and thin and his eyes are flat, entirely without joy. "Let's go back to where we found it. Let's head back to Wych Cross and let it go." His hand falls to her shoulder. Long fingers splay out. "Whatever it is, it's a wild creature. It's cruel to keep it in a cage." Fingertips caress, just once but it's enough; the involuntary shudder of her spine as he touches her bra strap is a red flag. She slides out of his grasp, aware even in separation of the clamminess of his skin.

"You're jealous," she says, triumphant, because here at last is the proof. "You're pissed off because I'll share a bed with the angel, but not with you. How pathetic is that? What, you think I'll be lonely if we take it back? Is that your plan?" He is bug-eyed, flushed with his own outrage, but she gives him no quarter; she has held all of this in for so long, and her anger is an abscess deep inside of her, rotten and stinking. "Did you think you could save me all over again, and this time you'd get your reward?"

"How can you—"

"I believed you," she continues. "You told me again and again that we were friends, and that you were okay with that, and I pushed down the doubt because I didn't want to lose you. But I'm bored of it now, Jimmy. I'm sick of you whining every time I tell you to get

out of my bed because I never fucking invited you in. And I am sick to death of you treating my friendship like a consolation prize."

"You're choosing a bloodsucking monster over me," Jimmy says. His face is still flushed, but his voice is dull, his shoulders slack; his traditional line of protest has been obliterated, and perhaps he can already sense the futility of the sympathy vote. "You're going to throw away two years of friendship so you can keep playing mummies and daddies with your weird pet."

"Two years of you chipping away at my patience," she fires back. God, it feels good to finally speak the unspeakable, and for him to listen, shamefaced at being found out. "Two years of you hanging around, waiting for me to cave in. That's not a friendship, Jimmy, that's a hostage situation."

"I'm your only friend," he says. "You can't afford to push me away." His last, bitterest shot. It should be a gut punch. It should leave her breathless and miserable, but she looks at Jimmy, at his sallow skin and the long, awkward features of his face—drooping eyes and bird-beak nose—and she wonders how this sad scarecrow of a man ever managed to hold her in his thrall.

She looks across to the angel, placid in its cage, gazing up at her with what she believes, deep in her heart, is pure canine adoration.

"I think you should go now," Frankie says.

Later, when night has fallen, the totality of her loneliness reveals itself to her in every creak of floorboards, every whisper of branches against the window. Her phone taunts her from the bedside table: who are you going to call? She has systematically alienated everyone in her life. Even her parents burn with shame at the mention of her: three stints at the psychiatric hospital, each one more draining for them than the last. She can still recall the tired resignation in her father's eyes as they wheeled her away to have her stomach pumped for the fourth time.

She's doing better now. It's been four years. She sends them Christmas cards every year so they know she's still alive. No return address. She's done being a burden to them.

The angel is asleep in its cage. She hears the occasional hitch of its breath, the rustle of paper as it stretches out its limbs. It is rapidly outgrowing this enclosure too. She doesn't know what she'll do when it does. Her sickness benefit doesn't stretch very far, and without Jimmy she probably won't get any more bar work to supplement it. Perhaps she'll have to let it roam the flat freely until she can afford a proper enclosure. It won't be so bad; it can sleep curled at the end of her bed, and if she closes her eyes, she can pretend that the gentle depression of the mattress is from a real person, sitting beside her, watching over her as she sleeps. Keeping her company. Keeping her safe.

She switches off the bedside lamp. Her room is plunged into abyssal darkness, and in the moments before her eyes adjust she stares into the black, the hiss of her own respiration like an incoming tide, and she imagines she is at sea beneath a starless sky, becalmed and utterly alone.

Frankie doesn't hear from Jimmy for weeks. She expects passive-aggressive texts, or to see him cruising by her front window, ominously slow in his car; she's always thought him the type. But she doesn't hear a word from him, doesn't bump into him in town, and even in her relief she feels the sting of loneliness. Did he care so little about her that this has been easy for him? Has he written her off as a mere failed conquest?

Without Jimmy's car she finds herself frittering away increasing amounts of money on buses and cabs, ferrying herself back and forth in search of fresh meat. Heart is not especially expensive but the angel is hungry, and growing, and she staves off her own hunger with stale cereal while the creature devours her offerings with its flytrap teeth, strips of gristle caught between long, thin incisors.

The angel grows bigger. Its body thickens; the taut bulk of its muscle is visible beneath parchment-yellow skin. It adopts a strange, simian gait, scrambling excitedly around the flat after Frankie like a hairless capuchin. Its wings remain dormant, folded neatly along its

spine. She's not certain it could ever fly. It seems too substantial now, too heavy.

And yet despite the uncanny ugliness of it, she feels a surge of affection whenever it clambers onto the sofa beside her, gripping the cushions between the cleft of its crude, cloven hands; she delights in the velvet of its skin, warm beneath her palm. The angel follows her everywhere. For the first time in her life, she has something that needs her. For the first time, she is able to give.

It is three weeks after her last angry confrontation with Jimmy when she returns home to find him sitting on her sofa, comfortable and relaxed, as though the last few weeks have been a figment of her disordered imagination. The angel squats in the centre of the room, a fleshy blotch on the threadbare rug. It takes Frankie a few moments to realise it isn't looking at Jimmy but past him, at the blonde woman standing in the kitchen doorway, a lit cigarette dangling from her fuchsia-painted lips.

Frankie drops her keys on the side table. The angel looks up. Its face is as smooth and sparse as always, blank gaze unreadable, but she senses its recognition. It gallops over, pressing itself against her calves; its wings flex periodically as if preparing for flight.

"What are you doing here?" Frankie demands.

The pink-mouthed girl smiles, exhaling grey smoke. She is tall and tanned and athletic. Long, sleek caramel hair. Frankie knows her vaguely from the drunken parties Jimmy used to take her to. "Jim wanted to show me your pet," she says, plucking the cigarette from between her lips. "I thought he was bullshitting, but…"

"I wasn't talking to you," Frankie says, a little too sharply; this girl probably has no idea she's being weaponised. "How did you get in here?"

"I've got spare keys, silly," Jimmy says, patting his pocket. The angel flinches at the sound; the nub of one wing presses sharp into Frankie's leg. "Jesus, what are you feeding it? It'll be bigger than you soon, and then what will you do? You can't feed it lamb hearts forever."

"It eats hearts?" The pink-mouthed girl grimaces.

"It's not your business anymore, Jimmy. You shouldn't even be here." Her muscles are tense, her voice shaky. She cannot comprehend

Jimmy's complete lack of reaction to her anger, and there is a small voice in the back of her mind asking paranoid little questions: were the last few weeks a weird, extended dream? The argument is still fresh and vivid in her mind, but can she trust that memory? Is she going insane again?

"Tamsin said you should send a picture of it to the papers," Jimmy continues. She can see he's not taking care of himself; his spiteful bravado is a poor cover; the lank tangle of his hair and cracked lips tell a different story. She might have felt sorry for him once. "They'd probably never believe it, but you'd get your five minutes' worth out of it. You might even get a bit of money. How are you doing for money, Frankie?"

She feels strangely brittle, as though she might splinter and shatter if she moves too quickly. "Just go, Jimmy. Please, leave the keys and go. I don't want you in my house anymore."

"You wouldn't believe how small it was when we first found it," Jimmy continues, oblivious. Across the room Tamsin puffs on her cigarette as though she breathes nicotine instead of oxygen. "Like a tiny little doll. I mean, it didn't even look real. Frankie's put her heart and soul into looking after it and it shows, doesn't it? Look how strong and healthy it looks." He gets slowly to his feet. The spite in his smile is unmistakeable. Her throat burns with angry bile. She hates him then. She hates him a hundred times more than she ever might have loved him.

The angel tenses at Jimmy's approach. A strange sound emanates from its open mouth: a thunderous rumble, the clatter-click of teeth vibrating against one another. She realises, with some surprise, that it is growling.

"Get out," she says. Her voice trembles but she does not cower. This is the last time he will ever have power over her. "Leave me alone. I don't need you, Jimmy. If you ever set foot in here again I'll call the police."

The angel bristles as Tamsin approaches. Frankie can sense the power in its muscles, the tension in its hunched body. She puts out a hand, runs placatory fingers over the ridge of its half-folded wings. The girl pauses at the door, scanning her with kohl-smudged eyes.

Taking in Frankie's heavy thighs, the roundness of her belly. The shabbiness of her clothes. And Frankie feels nothing. She has never wanted to be blonde, or thin, or beautiful. Sane, yes; she has always dreamed of that, of a brain that does not betray her, of stable moods and steady emotions. But in bringing this girl here Jimmy has badly misread her weaknesses. And she realises then that he has never really known her, not truly.

"He only wanted you so he could say he'd fucked a black girl," the girl says, with a casualness Frankie knows she has practiced. "I hope you know that."

It is almost dark by the time Frankie returns home from her second shift on the checkouts. She's got a plastic bag full of meat past its sell-by date; not hearts, but she's learned that the angel will eat it if it's hungry enough.

The supermarket job is a small triumph. It is the first time in her twenty-four years that she has felt strong enough to approach the world alone; to turn up to interview with her braids shorn and her hair springy-short, hastily-ironed blouse and charity shop shoes, and walk away with a job. The shadows around her lengthen and deepen as she approaches her block of flats, conspiring with the rapidly darkening sky. It's strange, she thinks, as she searches her pockets for her keys. She almost feels better without Jimmy's constant presence. Perhaps she'd always had the potential to go it alone. Perhaps Jimmy was a comfort blanket she never really needed.

She realises, raising her key to the lock, that the door is slightly ajar.

Frankie panics. Her brain sparks with frantic visions of overturned furniture, smashed windows; she has no valuables to steal, but the angel is uncaged and roaming free. Would someone think to steal it? She shoves open the door, stumbling into the darkened hall. The bag drops from her hand, forgotten. She peers into the living room, hunting for shadows. Listening for movement, though she can hear nothing but the erratic bass drum of her own heartbeat. And as she edges sideways into the living room, step by tentative step, keys

shoved between her knuckles like she'd do anything other than run, she realises she can smell blood.

Coherent thought abandons her. She stumbles into the room, wide-eyed, searching desperately for her angel. Is it hurt? Is it crying out in pain? Oh god, she thinks, don't let it be dead, I don't know what I'll do if it's dead. The carpet is dappled with blood, a Rorschach blot spreading from the sofa to the defunct gas fire; a red-black spattering fans out above the armchair, coming to an abrupt halt just shy of the kitchen door.

She runs into the kitchen. Her feet skid on the lino, and she has just enough time to register a single, ludicrous thought—*I'll have to clean the blood off my shoes before work tomorrow*—when she sees Jimmy.

He is crumpled beneath the kitchen counter, lolling boneless and empty on the floor. His face is bleached and bloodless, skin slack on his bones. Behind him, barely visible, is Tamsin; her long blonde hair is pooled out behind her, matted to the tiles with half-dried blood.

Frankie is too stunned to scream, too appalled by the copper-penny smell, the way Jimmy's body has collapsed in on itself, a discarded chrysalis. Frankie's shoes are glossy with blood. Her shell-shocked brain makes attempts at rational thought: they'll blame you for this, you can't stay here. She acknowledges the grimness of her situation with total paralysis, though her body is screaming at her to move, to go, to run.

Behind her, something is moving.

She turns on her heel, a sharp and clumsy motion. Her ankle grinds painfully beneath her weight and she falls, arms flailing for purchase and finding only air. She lands heavily. A sharp pain lances up her spine, into her brain, a welcome shock.

The angel approaches without fear. Wet slivers of meat nestle between its teeth, flat face tacky with gore. It moves towards her on hind legs, hands cupped and proffering. Inside, resting between slick, bifurcated fingers, is a human heart.

"What have you done?" Frankie whispers.

The angel pushes the heart towards her, silent and beseeching. This is a gift, she realises, horrified. The angel has brought her the heart of the man who hurt her, and it is unmistakeably proud of

what it has done. She stares at the broad set of its shoulders, the thick capillaries of its wings, flushed with new blood; from her place on the floor it seems to tower above her. It reaches out one bloody hand, cradling the heart in the cleft of the other; gently, almost lovingly, it slips a digit between her whimpering lips, prying open her clenched teeth with ease.

Don't she tries to plead, but her mouth is open wide and the word has no form. The heart is too big to fit but the angel pulls, straining to wrench her jaw wider. The pain is excruciating; the sour taste of Jimmy's heart vivid on her tongue. She raises her arms, tries to push it away but the angel is strong. It pushes harder, shoving the heart against her incisors; teeth scrape against still-warm meat. Tears stream down her face, into her open mouth. She tastes salt, bloody tissue. She thinks she might die here, choked to death, a human heart lodged in the cavity of her mouth.

And then abruptly, it stops.

The pressure on her jaw is suddenly relieved. Her teeth clamp down hard against spongy gristle. The curve of a ventricle presses against her tongue. She claws at her mouth, pulling the heart away just in time. The bile in her throat rushes up, expelling violently all over the tiles. There are shreds of meat in there, she notes, with numb horror, wiping her streaming eyes with the back of her trembling hand. She breathes through snot-thick nostrils, mouth open and gasping, face wet with tears and vomit and fluids she can't bear to think about.

Frankie feels the warm velvet of the angel's face nuzzling against her arm. She looks up, holding herself upright with slippery palms. The angel rises on its haunches, reaching out with great care to clasp her chin, bringing her close enough that she can see her own round, terrified face reflected in the black of its eyes. The stink of sweet carrion on its breath as it presses its cheek against hers, skin against blood-sticky skin. This is how she has taught it to love: to nurture, to feed, to protect. She has been a willing parent, a good mother, and now it is paying her back the only way it knows how. Eat the heart. Grow stronger. Eventually, she might even be able to protect herself the way the angel has protected her.

The angel releases its grip. It clambers up onto the kitchen counter, extending its wings as it nears the open window. Nicotine-yellow net curtains billow out into the night. It sits crouched on the sill for a moment, scanning the jagged black line of the treetops; in this low light, seen through tear-blurry eyes, it could almost be human.

Somewhere in the distance a siren bursts into life.

They must have heard screaming, Frankie realises, clambering slowly to her feet. The walls are paper-thin, the window wide open. The police will be here any minute and they will find her, bloody and shell-shocked, scraps of heart stuck between her molars. The angel hears her as she stands. It turns one last time, pale against the night sky. She wonders what it will do if she follows it. She wonders how far she would get if she tried.

It leaps. Wings burst open, magnificent, enormous; two powerful beats and it is up, buoyed on the wind, gliding with impossible grace towards the trees. The sirens are loud in Frankie's ears as she climbs onto the counter, trailing wet red shoeprints. She clings to the window frame with cold fingers, leaning out into the wind. She can't fly, but she can run. She can run a long way if she needs to.

THE PAIN-EATER'S DAUGHTER

Sara's dad travels with a brown leather bag. She doesn't know what's inside. Before it was her dad's, it belonged to Grandad and it bears the marks of a long life on the road, criss-crossed with scuffmarks like ancient scars. Sara is not allowed to touch the bag, or to ask what her dad keeps in there. She asked once, when she was younger, and her curiosity could not be quelled, not even by her dad's dark blue stare, the tacit disapproval of his downturned mouth. It's mochadi, he'd said. She understands that mochadi means *dirty,* but not in the way that muddy shoes are dirty, or a used teacup; it means dirty in your soul, the kind of unclean you can't wash away with soap and water. She had wanted to ask him why *he* was allowed to touch it if it was such a mochadi thing, but his eyes were hard frost, and she'd thought better of it.

The brown leather bag rattles when he picks it up; the bright clink of glass against glass, melodious as birdsong. She knows it's heavy because her dad is as strong as a horse and still his arm sags when he holds it. Always in the left hand; black-tipped fingers like frostbite, bruise-blue palm. When she asks if it hurts he just smiles, thin-lipped, and says it's fine. It's because of his work, he says, though she isn't allowed to ask about that either. All she knows about her dad's work is that he might leave at any time and be gone for hours, or days, and the brown leather bag always goes with him.

Her dad might leave at one in the morning and still her grandad will wake her up so that they can both stand bleary-eyed at the front door, in the yellow-lit dark, and wave after the van as it departs, like he's a hero going off to war. As though someday, he might not come back.

Sara is fourteen when her dad finally relents and takes her out on the road for the first time. Grandad has grown too sick to care for her, and Dad won't leave her at home with him, even though Grandad's sickness is not the kind that other people can catch. Her fingertips tingle with anticipation as she pulls on her hat and jacket, ties her laces with fumbling hands, a child again in her excitement. Her shoes are too small, and they pinch at the toe, but she doesn't complain; they keep the rain out, which is better than the last pair she had.

She slips into Grandad's room. The door is barely ajar, and there is only darkness inside. Dad has covered the windows in cardboard and thick black tape to keep the sun out. The light hurts Grandad's eyes, and so he must exist now in permanent twilight, like the night-animals Sara once saw at the zoo. It is a hoarder's room, a cave of wonders filled floor to ceiling with oddities: horseshoes and sun-bleached model trains, empty biscuit tins, the deflated lungs of a broken old accordion. A mountain range of warped and yellowing paperbacks against the far wall. She enters on light feet, though the soles of her shoes tap-click against the floorboards.

"There she is." His voice, like water gurgling down the drain. "My little Ginger Rogers." His head is propped up on a stack of pillows; eggshell skull, sparse hair like spider silk. "Where're you off to, petal?"

"Dad's taking me to work with him." Up close, she can see the grey lines webbing the whites of his eyes, a roadmap of blue-black veins winding beneath thin skin. Her excitement at the prospect of going on the road feels obscene, suddenly. She has always loved the days spent with her grandad. Those bright days where they would walk down to the park and sit in the sun, and he would teach her about the First World War, or how to do sums. He'd been born under a blue sky, he told her once; he'd been born on the grass and slept under the stars. This was before, he said, when you could live on the road and stop where you pleased. Sara can't imagine a life beyond the bricks and mortar of their flat. Beyond central heating and the gas hob and the warm sanctuary of her bed.

"Ah." It's cold in the room, but her grandad radiates a dry heat; his touch burns, as though he is smouldering beneath the skin. There is a part of Sara—tucked quietly away beneath the obstinate optimism of her adoration—that knows that her grandad is dying. That there is something sinister in the charcoal tint of his lips, the ink-dark whorls of his veins, and that perhaps this too is mochadi. "When I was your age, I was already on the road. It's important work, what we do. It's good to help people. But it's hard work, chavi. Dirty work." He smiles. His loose jowls pull tight, revealing saw-sharp jawbone. Pale, sad eyes. "I always hoped you'd get to be a child longer than I did."

"It's okay, Grandad." Bold jut of the chin, the self-assurance of youth. "I want to be an adult so I can help you and Dad."

"When your dai first brought you home…" He sighs, and his eyelids slip shut for a moment. "Ah, but you were so small I couldn't stand to pick you up for fear I might break you. I couldn't understand it. We'd always had big babies in our family, and there you were. Tiny little thing, like a bird. You'll always be a baby to me, Sara."

He is quiet then. His expression is so fond, so distant that Sara thinks he must be somewhere else in his mind. Somewhere where the sunshine heals instead of hurts, and the whole world is home, and she is a china-doll infant nestled in warm grass, beneath the wide blue sky.

"Where do you work, Dad?"

Sara is small in the passenger seat, puddled in her dad's old jumper. The footwell engulfs her tiny feet, her scuffed shoes. The thrum and rattle of the ancient engine is a mechanical lullaby. She fights to stay awake as they coast down tree-choked country lanes, onto the motorway, which seems to stretch out forever; a monotony of fields growing ghostly in the gathering dark. They have been driving for hours, and the van smells of loose tobacco and diesel and the faint charred-metal scent of the heater. Strange smells, not at all like home.

Her dad hasn't shaved in days, and his chin is dark with black whiskers, hedgehog-sharp. Grandad told her that they used to eat

hedgehogs out on the road. Hotchi-witchi, he called them, and said they were God's beasts.

"I work where I'm needed," her dad says. "Sometimes that's close to home, and sometimes people need me a long way away."

She wants to ask what people need him *for,* but she knows this is a forbidden question, like the contents of the brown leather bag. There is a small thrill inside of her at the thought that she might learn something of her dad's work now she is travelling with him. She wraps the sleeves of her dad's jumper around her, burrowing down into the soft wool, which still smells faintly of sweet hay, of warm horse. An old life.

"Who will take care of Grandad while we're gone?" she asks.

"Grandad can take care of himself." Her dad does not look up from the road. He is in shirtsleeves even though it's November, and Sara can see the blackened fingers of his left hand tight around the wheel, the patches of grey creeping down his knuckles. Perhaps whatever is wrong with Grandad is hereditary. She looks down at her own hands: fingers long and pink and narrow, blue-green veins beneath the skin. Perhaps she is too young for it to manifest yet.

"Couldn't we ask Mrs Adams to check on him?" Mrs Adams lives next door. She is old, but not quite so old as Grandad, and far stronger than him; she lives alone with a Yorkshire terrier that breaks into fits of frantic yapping in the night. Her dad thinks keeping animals in the house is dirty. "Or we could ask a nurse to come by, like Malur's family does for his grandma…"

"I don't want a nurse in the house. Or anyone else, for that matter." Her dad's fingers tighten. "Grandad will be fine on his own. He's well enough to feed himself and wash himself. He's not a baby, Sara. He doesn't need anyone to fetch after him."

Chided, she turns her face silently to the window. Her face is an ellipse, an off-kilter moon reflected against the deep, marine blue of the oncoming night. She thinks of her grandad's fragile hands. The skin, loose now on his bone-china skull, and the damp rasp of his breathing, in and out like a tide dragged across wet stones. On they drive, ever further from home, towards some nebulous place in the darkening distance where, her dad says, somebody needs him.

They pull up outside the house just before midnight. Sara rubs her bleary eyes with the back of her hand, clambering out of the passenger seat. "Come on," her dad says, and the leather bag hangs heavy from his left hand. "They're waiting."

The night air is peppermint-sharp in the back of her throat; her breath ghosts white when she exhales. The pavements shimmer with silvery frost. The houses all look the same here: windows frothy with net curtains, neatly-paved driveways upon which gleaming cars are parked. BMWs and Audis and Jags. Rich people cars, her dad calls them, disdainful. She wraps her arms tightly around herself and stands close to her dad as he walks up to the house. It is the only one in the street with lights on.

The door opens before they are halfway up the drive. A woman appears in the narrow gap, backlit. She glances over at the grubby van, looks doubtfully at the tall, unshaven man and his raggedy daughter standing before her. "Are you Dominic?" she asks. Her accent is strange, singsong; Sara has heard people talk like her on TV, but never in real life.

"Yes," he says. "And you must be Rosalia. I'm sorry it took so long. We live in Worthing, you see, and it's a long way to travel."

Rosalia nods, hesitant. Her gaze settles on Sara. She is probably wondering where on earth her mother is. Why she is awake at this ungodly hour, and so far from home.

"This is my daughter, Sara," her dad says. "I'd usually leave her at home, but I couldn't get a babysitter at short notice. I hope you don't mind if she comes in with me."

Sara meets Rosalia's gaze, undaunted by her curiosity. She is not as old as Sara had first thought; she is just very thin, and very tired, and her skin is crumpled like old paper, dark hair sparse as dandelion fluff. She looks, Sara thinks, like a hunted animal; like the hares her dad and uncles used to catch. Cold spring days on the downs, the dogs panting mist into the chill air, lean dogs with long faces and muscle like taut cord. The wild dance of the hare as it ran, serpentine spine and legs like pistons, so elegant in its white-eyed terror. And she

would always pray that the hare would escape even as her growling stomach longed for the warmth of the stew it would become.

"No," Rosalia says, looking hurriedly away. "No, of course not. Please. Um." She steps aside, allowing Sara and her dad through. The house is warm, almost unpleasantly so; a myriad of foreign scents hang in the fug as though they are trapped there. Coffee and takeaway grease and washing-up liquid. Sour wet-dog stink clinging stubbornly to the carpet. Life-smells. And there, underneath, a smell she recognises from home: a miasma of unwashed skin, fever sweat and alcohol wash. Sweet rot. The smell of sickness.

"He's upstairs," Rosalia says, as they stand for a moment in the hallway. Sara feels as though there is an invisible line dividing this sliver of space from the rest of the house; the demarcation between the world she inhabits and Rosalia's world, which is full of her private things, her secrets. Her dad says that these gorgios—these *other* people, *outside* people, who are not like them and Grandad—are mochadi. They live differently, he says. They live unclean lives. Sara isn't sure what an unclean life looks like. In spite of the discordant scents, Rosalia's home looks as inviting as a confectioner's window: cream carpet and butterscotch walls and crisp white cornicing. Sara is afraid she'll leave grimy marks if she touches anything, so she stands perfectly still, arms tight at her sides. "Will you need anything?"

"I have everything I need." He places a tentative foot on the bottom step. "Shall I start right away?"

"Yes." Dark eyes flit between the bag and the door, measuring the distance between. Sara realises that Rosalia wants to run. She wants to leave this sick-smelling house, away from *him,* this upstairs person her dad has come to see. She wants to bolt into the night and let the dark swallow her. Away from that soul-dirty bag with its bright, glassy voice, and the strange man who carries it. He ascends, and Rosalia tentatively begins to follow, but he pauses, regarding her with solemn eyes.

"You can't be in the room," he says, and she flinches at the sound of him, the chill of his gaze. But his voice is gentle, as if he is scolding a child too young to know the difference between right and wrong. Sara knows this voice. He is not a hard man, her dad; he has always been kind, and warm, but the world is neither of those things, and

her dad tries so hard to protect her. "It's not safe for you to be there while I work."

Rosalia frowns. Wrings her bony hands fretfully. "Will I be able to see him afterwards?" Then, timid, as though afraid of the answer: "Will he know I'm there?"

For the first time, Sara realises she shouldn't be here. She shouldn't be witnessing this exchange, as intimate as any romance except that instead of love, there is only sorrow, and fear beneath it like black water billowing under ice. And Sara understands that it is not sickness that permeates the air, but dying, slow and drawn-out and painful.

"There'll be time," her dad says, softly now. "There's always a little time."

He disappears up the stairs, into the room at the far end of the landing, and Rosalia watches him, her gaze reverent and afraid. There is the low whine of a door closing. The creak of floorboards somewhere above. Then there is quiet.

Sara does not realise she has been asleep on her feet until the sound of her name pulls her sharply awake. Her dad descends the stairs with a drunkard's unsteady gait. She stands alone in the empty hallway, eyes closed, arms wrapped tight around herself.

"How long have you been standing out here?" he asks. Mumbles, as though through a mouthful of loose teeth. He smells like cold earth, like a night out in an open field, and in the low light the leather bag seems tattooed with a lattice of frost. The air in the house feels different, too; that heavy sickroom stink is gone, and all the life-smells with it, as though an icy wind has swept through the house, stripping it clean like flesh from old bones.

"She said I could go inside," Sara says. "But I didn't want to." She doesn't tell him about the pristine carpet and warm butterscotch walls, too clean to be soiled by her dirty shoes and van-grubby hands. She belongs here about as well as she belongs in school, where the kids call her a *dirty pikey* and keep jealous watch over their belongings. Her dad is right; these people *do* live different lives.

Rosalia must hear them talking, because she appears in the doorway. She opens her mouth to speak, but she pauses, takes in the sight of Sara's dad, heavy-lidded and swaying, and the clean-cold smell in the air, and nothing emerges from her open mouth but a long and trembling sigh.

"He might not recognise you." Her dad's voice is vague, dreamy; he lifts a hand to his forehead, shielding his vision from the hall light. "Not at first. They forget, sometimes. You mustn't take it personally."

Rosalia draws in a sharp breath. "Yes. Yes, I understand. Thank you so much. I, um." She's shaking, now, a full-body tremble like the peak of a fever. "The money is on the mantelpiece. It's all there. You can count it if you like."

"You should go to him. He won't have all that long."

"Of course. Of course." A dull invocation, the sound of defeat. It strikes Sara as strange; isn't this what she paid for? Isn't it what she wanted? "Thank you. For what you've done for him. For me." Breathing deep, she tiptoes up the stairs, one hesitant step at a time, and when she gets to the top Sara turns away. This too is not for her to witness.

"Sara."

She looks up. Her dad is grimacing, pressing steepled fingers against his forehead. His right hand. The tips are a faint, ink-stained blue. "Will you get the money for me?" he asks. The bag rests at his feet, now, and his left arm hangs limp and heavy, like it's gone to sleep.

"Are you okay, Dad?"

"The money, Sara, please." Then, unclenching his teeth: "I'm okay, petal. Tiring work tonight, that's all. I'll be all right once we're home."

She does not want to cross the threshold into that other room, but she does as she is bid. She imagines soot-black marks flaking off the soles of her shoes, indelible on the soft pile of the carpet. Crammed-full bookshelves along the back wall adorned with trinkets: a pastel rainbow of candles; grotesquely proportioned crystal animals which are probably supposed to be cute. An enormous television in the corner, bigger than any television Sara has ever seen. And on the mantelpiece, flanking the brown paper envelope with *dominic* scrawled in Biro, is a procession of framed photographs. Rosalia in

better times, face round and sunlit and smiling, and a man beside her: deep brown skin and warm eyes, a beautiful man. He is young in the photos. They both are. Sara stares at the photographs for a long moment, trying to forge a connection between the thin, frightened woman upstairs and this woman, whose bright eyes and full body radiate joy. They are different people, inhabiting different worlds, and Sara thinks that perhaps, when he dies—the dark, beautiful man in that quiet room—then the woman in the photos will die too, and the thin, hollow Rosalia will be the only one left.

She pulls the sleeve of her dad's jumper over her fingers as she reaches for the envelope, careful to avoid the gleaming silver frames, the sugar-white marble of the mantel. Drawing the envelope to her chest, the reassuring weight of the money which, she knows, will only last them so long, and never long enough. As she passes back out into the hallway she glances up at the stairs, where the landing light glows as warm and deep as sunset, and she strains to hear but there is nothing, no sound at all except for the clack-clack of clock hands creeping inexorably towards the morning.

The road home is impenetrably dark; narrow, meandering lanes choked with trees. The fields, when the trees break rank, are blue in the moonlight and dappled with frost, the surface of a still and frozen ocean. Her dad is driving too fast. The van shudders and hops; the bag rattles loud in the back seat.

She clutches the strap of her seatbelt. "Slow down, Dad."

He doesn't hear her, or perhaps he's not paying attention. He has not spoken since they left Rosalia's house, extricating themselves and their van from Rosalia's world, where the streets are clean and quiet. Their estate is never quiet, not even in the smallest hours, and sometimes Sara is drawn from her bed by strange sounds: the chatter of teenagers smoking on the communal balconies, the murderous shriek of foxes. She finds silence as unnerving as the dark; ominous things hide in there, concealed among all the nothing.

"Dad," she says again, insistent now, and reaches out to tug his sleeve, but the second her hands untangle from the seatbelt something large and shadowy appears in the road. They are going too fast, and her dad's reflexes are sluggish. Sara clamps her hands tight over her face as they swerve, too late to avoid the thing in the road; the sick thud of something heavy rolling over the bonnet reverberates through Sara's cold bones, settling at the base of her skull as they hit the embankment and come to an abrupt halt.

"Shit." Her dad hurriedly unbuckles his seatbelt with trembling fingers. The van is tilted at an angle; one front wheel rests atop the embankment, and Sara grinds her heels into the footwell to keep from sliding out of her seat. Her dad clambers out of the van. Whatever they have hit is a vague, grey shape in the unlit dark.

Cold air floods in through the open door, sharp-toothed. Sara unclips her seatbelt, gently lowering herself into the slanted footwell, unbalanced and askew. She wants to proceed quietly but the door swings wide and gravity sends her tumbling on hands and knees to the tarmac.

"Get back in the van, Sara." Her dad holds up a protective hand, but it is inadequate; she can see something sprawled in the road, all bent-back limbs and bloodied, foaming muzzle, and it is *breathing* still, tongue protruding from its mouth like thick innards. A deer, broken and gasping.

"Dad."

He looks up at her, penitent; perhaps he has never heard his name spoken this way before, a single syllable imbued with such profound horror. Sara's eyes prickle with hot tears, and her throat seems to close in on itself, denying her speech. Her dad's left hand is splayed out against the deer's pelt, spattered now with blood-flecked foam. He looks so tired, so hollow. He looks so old. "Sara," he says, soft. "It's cold out here, Sara. You'll catch your death."

"You have to help." She forces the words through her clenched teeth. She will not allow herself to cry; she is not a child, she reminds herself, pressing her tongue hard against the roof of her mouth, but she can smell its pain, taste it in the back of her throat; blood and shit and panic, hot and sour, the smell of death rising in a slow, terrible wave.

"It's dying," Dad says quietly. "There's nothing I can do."

"It's in *pain*." Somehow, this is the worst thing. At least when it is dead, it will no longer feel, but it is terrible to watch it writhe, shattered legs twitching with an instinctive desire to run, to escape the pain, a hare in a frost-white field; fine blood sprays from its open mouth as it fights to draw breath. "I know you can help, like you helped that man."

His face hardens. "You don't know anything about that, Sara."

"Yes, I do." The tears are coming, now, and she swipes angrily at them with the backs of her knuckles, furious at herself. Furious at him for hiding it all from her. For pretending, all these years, that what he does is something *normal,* even as he forbids her the slightest knowledge of it. "You help people die. That's why people need you all over, and why you're gone for days, sometimes. Her house smelled like sickness, and when you came downstairs it was gone. You took it away."

"That isn't…"

"Then show me." It isn't only the deer, she realises, as she meets her father's dull gaze, his slack shoulders. It's the secrets and the not-knowing. Rosalia's silent, death-smelling house. Her grandad, thin and ghostly, blue skies lost to him forever. Her dad's blackened fingers and that bag, that horrible mochadi bag. It's the bloody foam and the caved-in spine and the rattle of labouring lungs. "Show me what you do."

He could refuse, as he has always done. He could shut her down with a look, that cold stare, treacherous as open water. But he does not, and Sara understands that there is guilt in his acquiescence, not just for the deer but for everything: the years of absence and secrecy, the midnight departures to who knows where, to do god knows what. For shutting her down every time she dared to ask why. His only daughter, caught between worlds.

"I'll need my bag," he says.

From the moment her fingers brush the leather she can sense it; there is a terrible gravity about this object, the malevolent thrum of a cursed thing. And she understands now why her dad has never wanted her to touch it. Can mochadi seep through the skin, into the

flesh and the fat? Can it leak into the bloodstream and stain the soul? It is too late to worry, she realises, as she struggles to carry the heavy bag to where her dad is waiting. She chose this.

Her dad pries open the clasp. The bag opens slowly, revealing a faded red lining, the colour of abraded flesh. Something glistens deep within its dark throat. With infinite care, he extricates each individual component, lining his arcane apparatus up on the wet tarmac. A teardrop-shaped glass flask, connected by a length of yellowing hose to an object wrapped in grey-stained canvas. The flask's second aperture—a tap, set low into the body—connects through a second length of hose to a long, narrow jar, which her dad places at a distance; he sets a fat rubber bung alongside it, as though to seal something within.

It's not death I offer, her dad explains, as he carefully cradles the canvas bundle in his left hand, unpeeling the folds like petals. Death is an easy thing to give, if the recipient is not choosy as to the method, but if it is death a person wants, they can seek it close to home; they need not call a strange man from miles away and pay him for the privilege.

The canvas falls away. In his palm, broad and smooth, is a strange, saddle-shaped piece of glass.

You must find the source of the pain, he explains, running a big, dark hand across the deer's flank, exploratory; you must be as precise as you can. The deer is injured in so many places that Sara does not know if precision is even possible. Sometimes it's easy, he tells her; if a cancer hasn't metastasised yet you can pin down the source of the pain, but if it's spread you must make an educated guess. You must choose the place with the greatest concentration, and hope that you are right, because you only get one chance.

I don't understand, she tells him. He is speaking in riddles; he is speaking as though she already knows, as though his world and his work is familiar to her.

Watch, he says.

He lifts the glass saddle to his mouth. A narrow mouthpiece sits adjacent to the opening where the hose connects. His right hand locates a spot along the deer's spine where the bone juts, a sharp and

unnatural protrusion. This, he says. This is the worst of it. And then he lifts his fingers from the base of the saddle, and she sees it clearly for the first time: a wicked barb, a sharp glass spire with a black and gleaming tip. For one long moment their eyes meet, and sorrow is etched in the line of his mouth.

He clamps the mouthpiece between his teeth. Lowers his face. She flinches as the barb pierces the deer's flank, sliding with ease into the meat; the animal emits a choked cry, convulsing under this new insult, but her dad's hand remains firm, fingertips caressing the sweat-damp velvet of its hide, and abruptly it calms, as though the barb has delivered anaesthetic straight into its veins. And then he inhales, long and slow, and she recoils unconsciously, expecting blood, *dreading* blood, but what fills the narrow chamber is something heavy and glossy and dark as oil. Trickling through the hose, down into the teardrop flask, fat gobbets pattering against the glass and it just keeps coming, that thick dark matter, red-black in the low light. He sucks it out like venom, more and more until the flask is almost full to bursting and the mouthpiece is clotted with it, staining his lips dark; his eyes are so heavy, his body ragdoll-limp at the joints and she realises, impossibly, that she has not seen him expel a single breath since that first long inhalation.

And just as it seems that the flask might shatter with the pressure, the substance begins to change. Shifting and roiling in the flask like something newly awoken, shrinking down into a dense glut. She steps back, afraid it might explode, that something might escape. He pauses in his inhalation, mouth pressed to the glass, meeting her gaze: *wait. Watch.*

The deer is silent, now, watching him with placid eyes. Its muzzle is caked brown with blood. For a moment there is dead silence, a perfect, sacred stillness. Deer and daughter and dad entwined. Then he exhales. The writhing matter blooms; tendrils burst out and up, dissipating as they rise. The thick, tumorous mass disintegrates into smoke, a churning storm-dark sky. Carried on the current of his exhalation, the smoke spills into the waiting jar until there is nothing left in the flask but a scattering of pale ash. Only then, does he lift his face from the instrument, still embedded deep in the deer's flesh.

A curl of smoke escapes from between his blackened lips. Now you see, he says. Now you understand.

They sleep that night in the back of the van, parked up on a verge a few minutes from where they left the deer on the side of the road. It will die soon; its spine is shattered, and slivers of ribcage are buried deep in its viscera, cavities filling slowly with blood. It will die, but it will die without pain. This is her dad's gift.

He has sleeping bags and blankets, a mound of musty old pillows. There is a camping stove and a battery-powered lantern. He gives her the biggest sleeping bag and tugs a thin fleece blanket over himself, curling on his side on the floor. "Try and sleep," he says. His mouth sounds full, like it's swollen inside.

"Do you always sleep in the van, Dad?" She huddles in the corner, bone-cold despite the pillows and blankets. The night is still and eerie, and there is only a thin shell of steel between them and whatever might be out there in the dark. She does not want to be here, but her dad is in no condition to drive home. She isn't even sure he'll be well enough come morning.

"Better that than a stranger's home." His lips are the colour of hypothermia. "Used to be lots of stopping places up and down the road. Others'd stop there too, so you'd never be alone. Course, you wouldn't usually be travelling alone in the first place. You'd go as a family, like we did when I was small." Laughter rattles in his chest, liquid. "Wouldn't be travelling in a bloody Transit either."

She's only ever seen her grandmother's wagon in black-and-white photographs: a beautiful round-roofed vardo carved with intricate vines and flowers and birds in flight. Grandad would describe the colours to her, running his finger over the photographs to indicate where the wood was painted red, where the carvings were painted gold. They'd burned it before Sara was born, Grandad told her. It was the way you did things back then. When Grandma died, her wagon went with her.

"This life is in your blood," her dad says.

Sara pulls the sleeping bag around her shoulders, burying her nose in the smooth folds. Exhaustion descends like a heavy weight, but the van is so cold, the floor so hard. This is not the way she'd imagined it would be. "And the other thing," she says. A thrill of fear runs through her, electric. She needs to know. She wants never to know. "Is that in my blood too?"

There is no answer. He is silent save for the low rasp of his breathing. He is asleep, and she is alone now, holding on to a question she may never be brave enough to ask again. Stopping place, her dad had called it, and that sounds so final, so bleak; this dark and quiet lane, where everything has stopped but the wind, whining at the cracks in the door like a wild beast desperate to get in.

Sara is fifteen when her grandad dies. It feels like he has been dying for a very long time. Before the road, and the deer. It feels like he has been dying forever.

He is delirious in his last few days. He mumbles in a language Sara has heard many times, but understands little of. Her dad responds in kind, his voice soothing, and it feels like another small slight, another cut of a thousand, this language they share which they have never shared with her.

Sara and her dad stand vigil, and though they have been on the road together countless times now he tells her there is no work to be done while Grandad is so sick. "We stay with him until the end," he says, firm, and Sara realises the end must be close. Grandad's decline has been slow and insidious, and she has asked her dad more than once if he can take away the pain but he just shakes his head, grim-mouthed. "It doesn't work that way," he says, regretful. "Not for us."

The night before Grandad dies, he is blessedly lucid. Mostly he sleeps, but his brief waking moments feel like a gift to Sara, who gently places her book face down on the bedside table so she can lean closer. He is weak, and his voice is barely louder than a whisper.

"We never wanted this for you," he says. "Me and your dad." Ash-grey veins mottle his pale skin like marble. "We always hoped you'd have a better life."

"It's okay, Grandad. It's not a bad life."

He smiles. Crumbling teeth jut from blue-black gums. "I wish you could've stayed in school," he says. "Proper school, not just me and a load of old books. You're so clever, Sara. You deserve more than this."

Her heart aches at the thought of school. She'd never belonged, even though her mother had been a gorgio, and she'd tried so hard to be like everyone else. To act and speak the way they did.

"You taught me to read and write." Defiant, now, with her nose in the air, and even in his weakness her grandad turns his face to her, as though seeking the heat of her anger, the fire in her eyes. "You taught me how to count. What do I need school for? I'm going to help people, the way you and Dad help people." She pauses. Looks him carefully in the eye so he understands that she is serious. So he understands that she has thought all of this through. "Please, let me take the pain away. I can do it. I know I can."

He swallows up her hand in the bone-cage of his fingers. "Sara," he says. "I know you want to help me, but you can't. This gift we have. This curse–"

"We *help* people. We stop people suffering. How can that be a curse?"

"Listen to me."

She pauses mid-protest, watching as he lifts himself inch by agonising inch, gaunt as famine and half-swallowed by bedding but sitting, now, pyjamas draped loose like old skin. His body trembles as he holds himself upright; his wasted muscles struggle to recall how it felt to do anything but lay still and die slowly.

"All gifts come with a cost," her grandad says. "No matter how careful you are, the pain will find its way inside you. It'll drift up, and you'll breathe it in. Swallow it down. It'll kill you slowly. Rot you from the inside out, little by little. It's like cancer, Sara. Once it's inside you, it never leaves."

"Mochadi," she says, and he nods.

"Other Rom won't mix with us. Not until their time has come, and even then most of them would rather die in pain than have us dirty their souls. And they're right. Look at me, Sara. I'm only sixty-three." Lips drawn back, more grimace than smile. "It's too late for me. Too late for your dad too, and that's my sin. When you've worked as long as we have your body becomes swollen with the poison you swallow. Decades of pain, deep in the flesh. So rotten with it that it'd kill anyone to try to swallow our pain. You, especially, with your mother's blood." He shakes his head. "This isn't how you want to go, petal."

How cruel, she thinks, as her grandad sinks back down into the bed, exhausted. She has been denied their language, their freedoms: blue skies and stopping places and open fires in the dark, impossible now, for the world has moved on and forced the Rom to march alongside. Her father's blood makes her dirty, strange; her mother's blood makes her weak. She belongs nowhere, to nothing, and perhaps this is freedom too, of a sort, but it feels so lonely.

Her grandad's eyes slip shut. She knows already that they will not open again. He has spent the very last of his energy. This great disappointment is his final gift.

When she looks back on it all, it's not the deer or the photos on Rosalia's mantelpiece or even that first cold, awful night in the van that she remembers most. It's the sight of her grandad's possessions swallowed by fire. Everything he was in life: his books and clothes and jewellery, his multitude of trinkets. Earthly trappings acquired over six decades, blackened and crumbling as the flames licked at the autumn sky. Trees the colour of old blood. And no matter how many homes she visits in the years after his death—sometimes as a child, sometimes as counsellor, holding hands and wiping away tears as her father exorcises suffering in a closed and silent room—she can never acquire enough memories to erase the smell of that bonfire. How unfair it had felt to eradicate every trace of him, as though a single book or pair of shoes might tether his spirit forever to the earth.

It starts with a tremor. An unsteadiness in her dad's left hand which travels, gradually, evolving over months into intense myoclonic spasms. By now his left hand is frostbite-black, and he wears gloves to disguise the dark, waxy skin, knuckles fat and stiff with fluid. It's fine, he tells her, just a touch of the old rheumatism. She knows rheumatism is a disease of the bone, and it does not cause the muscles and tendons to contract with sudden violence so that the arm corkscrews tight against the body, and the pain of it is written in the hard clench of his teeth. It's fine, he insists, and when she eventually takes over the longer drives, it's because of his bad back, his gammy knee, a litany of mundane aches he wears in place of the truth.

All gifts come with a cost, her grandad had said.

By the time Sara is sixteen, her dad's left hand has grown so weak that he can no longer hold the bag, transferring it permanently to his right. He does not stop working. You adapt, he says, though they never talk about why. It hurts her to watch him pretend that he is okay even as his body fails, the rust of his illness infiltrating every part of him; the vicious spasticity of limbs which no longer fully obey him, restless even in sleep. His left eye drifts and wanders, permanently eclipsed now by the half-disc of a drooping eyelid. There is a drunken sluggishness to his gait, his speech, and his clients pause at the door now, as though the arcane magic he has promised them suddenly feels like so much snake-oil. His visible disability is discomfiting, somehow, to these people, for whom pain has become an inextricable part of their lives.

They pay, still. Desperation is more powerful than revulsion.

He sleeps in the passenger seat as she drives them home. His limbs twitch gently in repose, and she can pretend he's dreaming, the way cats dream with their whole bodies; she can pretend he has found freedom in sleep. Perhaps he's riding horses along the lanes, like he did when he was a boy, or hunting rabbits on the Downs, and nothing hurts except the cold wind scouring his dark, unblemished skin.

Her dad is not dying. Not yet. Somehow, this is harder to accept than her grandad's slow death. She thinks she understands those people who stare with ill-disguised disquiet at her shambling

father, the sideways droop of his mouth and the greyish pallor of his skin, the starkness of his systemic degeneration. It is easier to accept sickness when it comes with a terminal endpoint; to know that someone's suffering is finite. But suffering as a state of being is a terrifying thought. Her dad has become something horribly symbolic, a grotesque Saint Sebastian reminding those who look upon him not of the glory of martyrdom, nor the beauty of stoicism, but of the destructive power of unremitting pain.

It is late July and the sky is a molten blue. An oppressive heat fills the empty space between heaven and earth, baked deep into the concrete so that even at night the air is heavy with residual warmth. Her dad finds the sunlight intolerable, and so they travel only after dark, with the windows wound down so that a lethargic trickle of warm air washes through the van's sweat-hot interior. It is impossible to sleep in the van; she has hung dark curtains between the seats and the back so that her dad will have shade to rest in during the daylight hours, but she needs air and sunshine, to stretch her legs after driving for miles. Sometimes, she will find a sunny spot somewhere off a layby, and she will stretch out her limbs so that her body is in full contact with the grass and the earth and the sun, and though the heat is thick and heavy in her skull she breathes in the smell of the cracked, dusty earth, and she remembers doing fractions with Grandad in the park; the spidery scrawl of his handwriting and the warm humour in his smile. Sometimes she will close her eyes and imagine he is there, somewhere, just out of reach.

In the pale, still hours just before sunrise her dad speaks. His body is whippet-thin beneath the woollen blanket; he holds her face in his off-kilter gaze and she loves him, even now, this crumbling shell in which her father resides. She has always loved him. He has raised her and taught her and tried to protect her, in his way, and he hasn't always been good at it, but he has never stopped trying.

"Before we go home," he says. "There's something I need you to help me with. It's about the jars."

Her body is fatigued from hours of driving. Her eyes burn with the strain of her vigilance; she has never forgotten that first night on the road. She wants to crawl into her bed and burrow beneath the blankets, rest her lead-heavy skull on something soft and let sleep steal her away. And yet she cannot deny her dad this request; more than that, she cannot deny her own curiosity, her desperation to seize whatever scraps of their shared history he might offer.

She drives, on his instruction, to the wastewater works a few miles from home. A cankerous eyesore on the coast, stretching industrial fingers out into the dull water; the ripe summer stink of it is vivid in her childhood memories, though there is only the salt tang of the sea as she opens the van door, easing her aching bones out of the driver's seat. The bag rests at her feet, forbidding; it is only the second time she has been permitted to touch it, and its malign aura has not diminished over time.

"There's an old shed about five minutes down the road there," her dad says. "You'll find the padlock key in the bottom of the bag. It'll make sense when you're inside."

"Will you be all right here on your own?" She wants him to come with her. She wants him to explain it all to her in detail, starting at the beginning and on until the present day: to this exact moment, when the stark reality of his illness has finally won out over his desire to protect her from the truth. She wants to know everything and knows that she never will.

"I've been coming here for years, and I've never seen a soul," he says, with a lopsided smile. "I'll be fine, Sara. You don't need to worry about me."

The foliage is thick and lush as she walks down the darkened path, snatching glances of the grey-grubby van over her shoulder; there is a lingering humidity that makes her think of the rainforests she'd read about as a child. Despite the approaching sunrise the birds are silent. The bag is heavy in her hand, and she shifts her grip from right to left. It is too late to worry about the malevolent power imbued within the cracked leather, permeating the flesh as insidious as radiation. She is already mochadi. It cannot be undone now.

The 'shed' is a decaying brick monolith, huge and ugly. Scabrous paint flaking like psoriasis. The small windows are boarded over, and the low-angled roof is thick with moss so dark it is almost black. The silence here feels almost physical. Heavy, like the sky just before a storm.

Opening the bag feels like breaking the final taboo; her fingers hesitate at the clasp, unwilling, but she forces herself to pry it open. Her hands slip into the red-lined throat of the bag, feeling her way tentatively between the sealed jars—soft fingers, so careful—until something small and cold reveals itself, tucked away into one corner. She plucks it between thumb and forefinger, marvelling at its untarnished sheen.

Cautiously, Sara approaches the building. She does not know what she will find in there. All she knows is that she must take the jars inside and lock them away. They have accumulated over the weeks and there is something uncomfortably volatile about them, as though they might spontaneously shatter and release their poison back out into the world. She has never thought to question what happens to the jars once they are filled; by which method a substance as corrosive and mutagenic as pure pain might be disposed of.

The key slips into the lock. A shaft of pale light illuminates the interior, and her eyes grow wide. It is enormous, this place, stretching out into pitch darkness. Row upon row of shelving reaches up to the darkened ceiling. Each shelf is packed tight with jars, crammed full of them, and as she stands there in that silent doorway, clutching the bag tight in both hands, it seems to her, impossibly, that the jars are screaming.

She breathes deep. The smell of industrial rot is strong here; the shelves are thick with blood-dark rust, and the concrete floor is webbed with thick cracks. Nothing lives in here; no weeds or spiderwebs, no fungus sprouting in the dark, damp corners, a hideous sterility. She understands why. The screaming she imagines is not a sound but a sensation, the persistent thrum of a plucked string endlessly ringing out, and she feels it deep in her gut, reverberating in her bones, as though they have cracked her open and are screaming

into her. Even the very lowest form of organic life could find no peace in this house of wounds.

The bag feels heavier than it ever has before as she gingerly eases it to the ground. Dust motes dance in the sluggish air. She reaches in and extracts a jar. It is cold to the touch, and as she approaches the shelf the murk within begins to swirl, coalescing on the far side of the jar as though reaching out in desperation to its kin. The sight of it should horrify her, but there is only a morbid curiosity at the way the substance shifts and coils, pulsating like something living. It knows it belongs here. Pain calls to pain, she thinks, as she places the jars on the shelf, where their contents settle once more, placated by proximity.

She walks down the rudimentary aisles, stopping just shy of the places the watery dawn light cannot reach. There must be thousands of jars in here. Decades' worth of them, stacked up to the ceiling and inches from the floor, anonymous in their uniformity. The older ones are coated in a veneer of pale grey dust. She runs a tentative finger through the grime; the pain-mist is still and serene behind the glass. How many years have elapsed since it was extracted? She turns on her heel, dizzy with the extent of it, this repository of human suffering. She remembers Rosalia, so many years ago. The photos on her mantelpiece. The beautiful man with his warm, dark eyes, the man he was before the pain destroyed him. His essence is here, somewhere, distilled and sealed inside an unlabelled vessel like all the others. She is seized with the desire to catalogue all of it; to go back to the very first jar and tell its story in full. To tell all their stories.

She locks the door behind her, takes up the bag, so light without its cargo. The sky outside is shot through with scarlet. A piece of doggerel comes to her; her grandad's voice, singsong: *red sky in the morning, shepherd's warning.*

Her dad is sleeping when she returns to the van. She places the bag at his feet, careful not to disturb him, though he seems utterly dead to the world. He looks peaceful, but his breath comes in short, pneumonic bursts. The breath is curdling in his lungs. Eventually, he will forget how to breathe. How to swallow. He will choke on his own air. Inhale his own spit and drown.

Sara slips into the driver's seat. Turns the key in the ignition. The van starts with a drawn-out, bronchial rattle.

Soon, the sun will come up.

The summer heat swells like a fever until the horizon is clotted with thick, dark cloud, and the weight of it exerts a pressure so fierce Sara can feel it in the knotted gristle of her overtired brain. She has not worked in two weeks. Her dad has been too ill to travel lately. The fierce heat and relentless, pounding sun have made him fragile, and he struggles to walk, to sit upright, to drag himself to the bathroom. Soon, he will be able to do none of these things, and for him the indignity of his inability will be harder to bear than any amount of pain.

Their money is running out. That, too, is hard to bear.

In the early hours the storm breaks at last with a thunderclap like glass shattering overhead, a concussive blast. Sara is torn from her bed, breathless and sweat-drenched; rain hammers insistently at the window, and somewhere in the house her dad is crying out.

She runs trembling fingers through damp hair, smoothing it into a loose ponytail. Lightning strobes through the closed curtains; she pulls up the sash window a few inches, welcoming in cool air. Rain spatters the desk, the piles of meaningful junk gleaned from charity shops and car boot sales. Gifts brought home by her dad after days on the road. She has thrown nothing away, though she has outgrown most of it. The dead-eyed china dolls and plastic horses and gaudy costume jewellery are relics of a kinder time.

Sara hurries to her dad's room. The depth of the darkness within is almost total; blackout blinds protect him from the ravages of daylight, held firm to the window frame with thick black gaffer tape. Three oscillating fans stand sentinel at his bedside, whirring ineffectually. Her dad is sprawled beside the bed, clawing at the divan with useless hands. There is not enough strength in his pyjama-clad legs to push him back up. She doesn't know how long he's been lying here like this, crying out for help, unheard.

"I'm so sorry Dad." She is small, still, but he is so light, as though beneath his clothes there are only bones and empty skin. Leanness has given way to emaciation. She eases him back onto the bed, pulls the sheet up over him; despite the lingering heat he is shivering, and his teeth rattle in his cadaverous skull. "I'm so sorry." Over and over, because she cannot think of anything else to say; the acute embarrassment of it, the teenage daughter helping her incapable dad into bed, and worse, the shame of sleeping through his feeble cries for help.

"Hurts," he says, through gritted teeth. His arms jitter and flail; the pain and the spasms seem to come in tandem now. His eyes are squeezed tight. Sweat beads at his temples, and his skin is so hot she can hardly bear to touch him at all. Like Grandad in his later years, but devoid of the quiet dignity his slow deterioration permitted him. There is nothing dignified in her dad's suffering.

"I know, Dad." Sharp tears prickle behind her eyes, but it is anger that wells up inside of her, cresting like a wave. She bites her tongue so hard she can taste blood. "Try to rest. I'll bring you something to help you sleep, okay?"

He nods, grim-faced. The rain hammers relentlessly on unseen glass. She gets up. Shuffles into the kitchen, where two weeks' worth of washing up is strewn across the worktops, piled high in the sink. A faint putrid odour lingers in the still air, the scent of decay rising from overstuffed binbags, the remnants of old, crusted food. She wants to sweep it all to the floor, fling the plates and bowls and glasses at the wall until they shatter into tiny pieces. She wants to open the window and scream into the night until she is empty.

She is overwhelmed by her powerlessness. Even if her mother's weakness could be excised from her she would still be unable to take his pain away. This is the hardest thing of all. He has spent his life easing other people's misery; that he must suffer until his last breath is a cruelty she cannot reconcile.

Sara fishes in the cupboard for her dad's pain medication. Gleaming red-and-white capsules nestled in silvery blister packs, the strongest medication the doctor would give him and still almost useless. The thrum of the rain is like distant static. She pops a capsule

out onto the table and stares at it for a long time. Tentatively, she picks it up. Pinches the red half with her left thumb and forefinger, the white half with her right. The shell pulls apart, scattering powder onto the worktop like ash. She stares at this for a long time too.

She warms milk in a pan on the hob. Spoonfuls of golden syrup stirred in one after another, because her dad has always had a sweet tooth, and these days he can barely taste at all. She cannot consume his pain. She cannot grant him serenity in these final months. But there is one gift that she can still give.

Her dad's room is sparse, empty of all but the most essential things. He is not a magpie like his daughter, nor a hoarder of treasures like his father. All he has is his infinity of jars, melting into shadow and swallowed by dust. A mausoleum of untold stories.

"Here," Sara says. She helps her dad sit. His muscles convulse beneath the flat of her palms, an endless dance. His hair has turned the stark white of bleached bones. She picks up the mug of warm milk with her free hand, helps him wrap trembling hands around it and lift, up to his mouth where he fights to swallow it down. He drinks, slow and laborious; she dabs at his chin with the corner of a tea towel, mopping up rivulets of milk. When he is finished, she lowers him gently back down, fussing with his pillows and blankets until he puts out a hand, gentle, his fingers closing lightly around her wrist.

"I'm okay, Sara." Hollow eyes crinkle, a tired and ragged smile. "You don't need to worry."

Her fingers tangle in a loose skein of bedsheet. She stares hard at her own knuckles, at the unmarked skin, the long fingers she inherited from her father. Piano fingers, Grandad had called them, though there wasn't a musical bone in her body. Hot tears burn inside her nose, and she forces them down, swallowing her sadness. Forces herself to meet her dad's gaze so she can burn the warmth of his smile into her memory; the famine-sharp contours of his face and the fevered brightness of his eyes. Love like delirium.

"Thank you, petal," he says.

She stays with him until he falls asleep. Until the twitching of his limbs subsides, and his breathing slows. Until, for the first time in a long time, he is completely still.

The gold coins she fishes from her pocket were salvaged from her grandad's belongings just before they'd burnt it all to ash. She has kept them in her desk drawer, and when she misses her grandad she takes them out, and holds one in each hand, and the weight of them is comforting, as though a little bit of him still lives inside of them. She places the coins gently atop her dad's closed eyes, the way he'd done for Grandad. She doesn't understand the significance of this act, but it feels right. And the words she whispers into the shell of his ear, a language she has never before spoken, but which she must keep alive; those feel right, too. "Kushti bok." Good luck. Goodbye.

Sara stands up. She switches off the fans, one by one, watching them slow and stutter and stop. She reaches out and slowly peels back the tape holding the blackout blind firm against the window. Faint light filters through the gaps, tracing her dad's profile in silver, his eyes shining gold.

The brown leather bag sits at the foot of the bed. She does not hesitate as she picks it up, and it is featherlight in her hand, a faint patina of dust dulling its soft sheen. The chime of glass against glass, a familiar melody. The promise of deliverance. For all her inherited weakness, for all her grandad's warning, nobody had ever told her that she could *not*. What is there left, now, but this? This life is in your blood, her dad had told her.

Her few selected possessions are packed and ready, a scribbled note left on the hallway table: *please cremate him*. She hefts the rucksack over her shoulder, the brown leather bag in her left hand. The keys to the van in her pocket. Outside, the sun is beginning its slow ascent. The rain has washed the pavements clean of dust, and the air is sweet and cool in her throat. All the life-smells are gone, and all the death-smells too. The storm has stripped everything clean, like flesh from old bones. Like the world is starting over.

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